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# Illustrations of Nepantleras: Bridge Making Potential in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* and *The Guardians*

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ILLUSTRATIONS OF *NEPANTLERAS*: BRIDGE MAKING POTENTIAL IN ANA  
CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD* AND *THE GUARDIANS*

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

Literature

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by

Amanda Patrick

November 2016

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### ILLUSTRATIONS OF *NEPANTLERAS*: BRIDGE MAKING POTENTIAL IN ANA CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD* AND *THE GUARDIANS*

by

Amanda Patrick

November 2016

Chicana literature to date has extensively illustrated the process of identity construction—the development of mestiza consciousness—as the means through which Mexican American females may thwart the agents of oppressive patriarchal authority in their lives. While this highly theoretical and politicized literature has contributed greatly to discussions of identity, agency, and the subjective self, many Chicana authors and activists express concerns regarding the fate of the Chicana/o collective. Some consider the relationship between feminist Chicanas and their more traditional families and communities to be irreconcilable. Using the theories of Gloria Anzaldúa, I argue that the novels *So Far from God* and *The Guardians* by Ana Castillo address these concerns regarding the relationship between feminist Chicanas and other members of their home communities. Through unique representations of male characters, of Catholicism, and of socially/politically active Chicanas, these novels demonstrate the importance for inclusive methodologies that bridge across societally constructed divides, in order to create positive change for all.

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## CHAPTER I

SITUATING THE WORKS OF ANA CASTILLO: THE HISTORY AND  
TRADITIONS OF THE CHICANA LITERARY CANON

Ana Castillo's novels *So Far From God (So Far)* and *The Guardians* contribute to a rich canon of literature by Mexican-American women known as *Chicana* literature. The word "Chicano," a synonym for "Mexican-American," is an identifying label that carries significant political nuance. If one utilizes the identity category "Chicano" or "Chicana" to describe him or herself, there is an implicit understanding that this individual takes pride in his or her heritage and is conscious of numerous sociopolitical and historical injustices that have been met by his or her people (Christie and Gonzalez 3).<sup>1</sup> Chicana literature, then, is a politicized genre known for vocalizing feminist, environmental, economic, and cultural concerns. In *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo contributes to the politics of the canon by adding her own critiques of hegemonic, misogynist society.

Castillo's tactics, however, are far from conventional as her novels contain unique narrative styles and frame new methods for addressing the concerns of Chicana feminism. *So Far* and *Guardians* develop narratively through the assemblage of diverse perspectives, and are distinctively composed of a blend of personas and their viewpoints that are both familiar to and divergent from the genre norm. In this paper, I argue that Castillo's representation of males, of the spiritual beliefs of politicized females, and of the relationship between the individual female and her community, offer new methodologies for personal and societal change that are comprehensive, inclusive, and optimistic. In order to fully grasp the innovative qualities of these

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<sup>1</sup> I use Chicana/o to discuss the Mexican-American community, or a member of this community, without specifying gender.

novels and their contributions to the canon, this introduction provides a detailed examination of the historical and ideological development of Chicana feminist politics, describes the major theoretical contributions made by Chicana authors, and observes theoretical and methodological challenges that have emerged in recent years concerning Chicana activism. In addition, this introduction illustrates how the Chicana literary genre from the 1970s onwards has addressed the sociopolitical and theoretical concerns brought forth by Chicana feminism. By situating Castillo's work within the context of this politicized literary canon, I elucidate her contributions to the activisms, theories, and methodologies of this genre.

Though Chicana theory and literature did not fully emerge as its own distinct genre until the 1970s, it responds to and converses with a wide range of theories and literary works that came before its prime. In 1925, Mexican author José Vasconcelos wrote an important book entitled *La Raza Cósmica* in which he introduced his vision for the creation of a new world order. In opposition to the attitude of U.S. Anglo and European exceptionalism, and to the argument for the importance of racial purity, Vasconcelos draws attention to the vitality and potential of the mestizo race, the mixed race, of the inhabitants of Central and South America. He claims that in these former Iberian colonies, "we have all the races and all the aptitudes" (39). Due to their ancestral and cultural ties to pre-contact Native American civilizations, to European civilizations, and to many African civilizations, Vasconcelos argues that mestizo peoples are particularly capable of initiating a new era in which the identity categories traditionally used to differentiate humankind will become obsolete. As modernity and globalization assist in the migration and dispersion of mestizo people, he foresees continued intercultural and interracial mixing, the product of which will be the establishment of an entirely new race, the *raza cosmica*. The astoundingly diverse makings of this race will necessitate that it will "no longer be a race of



a single color or particular features” (20). Rather, with the biological contribution of all peoples of the world, he predicts: “What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and a truly universal vision” (20). Speaking of Vasconcelos and his theory of the *Cosmic Race*, author, critic, and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa notes, “opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity” (*Borderlands* 99). As a society composed of such diversity, a diversity impossible to segregate or to stratify as it manifests itself in the very bodies of each individual, the laws of the land will reflect the heart of the people, “a heart that embraces and contains everything and is moved with sympathy” (408). In effect, Vasconcelos argues, the construction of the “Raza Cosmica” race would ensure an end to the marginalization, oppression, and inequality of peoples throughout the world.

Similarly interested in forming a politics of inclusion, the various civil rights movements that burst forth in the 1960s helped to highlight the extent to which traditional identity categories contribute to societal divides and the maintenance of systems of oppression. For many, this decade represents a period of sociopolitical awakening, as activists demonstrated the ways in which one’s socioeconomic and political realities were largely shaped by his or her skin color, gender, and geo-historical backgrounds. In her book *Las Hermanas*, Lara Medina notes that this was the time of “Civil rights movements, feminism, antiwar protests, gay and lesbian activism, Latin American liberation movements, and Vatican II [which all] contributed to a milieu of social unrest and radical transformation” (2-3). The Mexican-American or Chicano community was not exempt from experiencing and contributing to this widespread social change. Starting early in the decade, a Chicano activist by the name of César Chavez worked to organize the

many Chicano and Mexican migrant agricultural laborers along the west coast. Together, activists and laborers worked to bring to light the gross physical and economic mistreatments of agricultural workers. They also challenged U.S. immigration policies, including the long-term practice of facilitating much needed migrant labor during harvest seasons then subsequently punishing these workers for their illegal status (Christie and Gonzalez 38). Chavez, along with thousands of others, demanded better pay, safer working conditions, adequate seasonal housing, and more relaxed border regulations for migrant workers. With the help of hardworking community organizers, The United Farmworkers Movement began in 1965 and secured huge reforms for employees of the agricultural industry (Rebolledo and Rivero 21).

As members within the Chicano community began to find platforms from which they were able to vocalize their specific needs and concerns to society at large, their political and social projects expanded. The United Farmworkers Movement gave way to a large scale cultural and political period of activism known as The Chicano Movement, or *El Movimiento*. Critics Tey Rebolledo and Eliana Rivero explain the activists' transition from the singular focus of agricultural reform toward other political and social concerns:

Largely working class, this group also had its share of artists and intellectuals. On campuses across the country students, both men and women began to organize and demand rights. The long debate about the Vietnam War further served to exacerbate the protests. The United Farmworkers Movement, 1965, the National Chicano Moratorium, and the founding of the Raza Unida Party, 1970, all contributed to an awakening of what is now known as the Chicano Movement (21).

Thus, the regional activism that first emerged as a response to the treatment of the agricultural workers in the southwestern United States sparked dialogue across the country as Chicanas/os

shared their similar experiences with economic and racial oppression. Through the influence of El Movimiento, many Chicana/os began to understand their heritage as contributory not just to their cultural makeup but also to their existence as a sociopolitical demographic within the United States.

As El Movimiento continued to engender social awareness and cultural pride within the Chicano community, it became a movement characterized by an enormous output of literary and academic works. Danizette Martínez affirms, the “movement of the 1960s opened a gate for novels, and other poetry, short stories, essays, and plays, to flow from the pens of contemporary Chicana/o writers” (217). Chicana/o theorists and writers of the 1960s were influenced by activists, philosophies and theories that advocated for an upheaval of the kinds of social and political systems that contributed to the oppression of marginalized peoples. The most influential of these theories was, of course, Marxism. As Marxist thought gained attention worldwide, minority communities throughout the United States, including the Chicana/o community, began to recognize their estrangement from the affluence of white society as “classist.” In an article published in the mid-1970s, Tatcho Mindiola observes the spreading attraction to socialism within *El Movimiento* and states, “The growing use of Marxian concepts and ideas among Chicano intellectuals is obvious in the Chicano Academic Literature” (179). And yet, Chicanos also understood that Marxism failed to explain just why it was that specifically people-of-color were largely relegated to the working class. While classism certainly played a role in their economic oppression, Chicanos insisted that cultural and institutionalized racism functioned as “the ideological justification for the class exploitation of Chicanos . . . race determines their occupational placement within the working class” (Mindiola 180). They argued that it was American capitalism in conjunction with institutionalized racism that worked to funnel money

(read: power) into the hands of the white upper class all the while keeping non-white members of society economically oppressed. Therefore, many Chicanos advocated for socialist reforms while maintaining the simultaneous need to address racist oppression within the United States.

As many Chicanos called for socialist reforms, some even called for political reform through armed rebellion in order to acquire the land of Aztlán back from the United States, land in the American southwest that had been (and still is for some) home to pre-contact indio-nations and Mexican peoples before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican American War in 1848. Authors such as Américo Paredes and Rudolfo Acuña wrote inspiring stories of resistance that portrayed the American southwest as part of the Chicano homeland, which had been invaded by the U.S. Author and theorist Ana Castillo reminds readers in *Massacre of the Dreamers*:

It is erroneous to categorize Chicano/as as immigrants (which implies that we are newly arrived and equated with those groups from Europe and other countries) who must only pay our dues as European immigrants did and over time we too, will become part of the U.S. social fabric. While there is admittedly an ongoing growing population migrating from Mexico (as from other parts of the world today), a large percentage of Chicano/as are not immigrants. In fact, the ancestors of many are from the Southwest United States and were not solely Spanish or Mexican but also Amerindian. (2-3)

In other words, the annexation of the U.S. southwest “basically layered one nation over an already existing one” (Hurtado 149), and the desire for the construction of Aztlán appeared as a romantic longing for a pre-Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo--even pre-colonial contact--homeland. As many theoretical works of this time saw the construction of Aztlán as a justifiable goal and a potential for respite from the institutionalized racism and economic oppression within hegemonic

white society, fiction authors wrote romantic imaginings of Aztlán, integrated the Spanish language into their writings, valorized traditional Mexican culture, and made efforts to resurrect the lost histories and traditions of indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup>

The mythic, romantic recollection of Mexican and Indigenous cultures, however, was not shared by many Mexican-American females or Chicanas. As many pointed out, to idealize Aztec society was to endorse the subjugation of women, as the females of Aztec society were treated as second class citizens, even possessions. Additional contention between the male and female activists arose as it became increasingly apparent that women were not altogether welcome within many of the male-dominated organizations and literary publications of *El Movimiento*. Commenting on the exclusion of females from political groups and the ways in which females' concerns were silenced, one female activist explained, "When a freshman male comes to MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantial Chicano de Aztlán—a Chicano student organization that began in California in the 1960s) he is approached and welcomed. He is taught by observation that the Chicanas are only useful in areas of clerical and sexual activities. . . . [Men] use the movement and Chicanismo to take her to bed. And when she refuses, she is *vendida* because she is not looking after the welfare of her men" (Vidal 132-140). Though many women took part in the activism of *El Movimiento*, it was made evident that a great number within the Chicano community considered the fight for *la causa* (the fight against racist, corporate America) to be a man's fight. Women in organizations like MEChA were meant to assist through passive observance and the accommodation of men's desires. Those who didn't were often considered traitors to *la raza*.

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<sup>2</sup> Rivero and Rebolledo assert that Chicana/o narratives in the early days of the movement were filled with "A sentimental recall of the past, generally expressed in nostalgic Edenic terms" (18). For further examples, see Christie and Gonzalez, and Madsen.

Thus, as many Chicanos advocated for legislative and economic reform during *El Movimiento*, Chicana activists demonstrated the need to address forms of cultural and gender oppression in addition to political oppression—even when the agents of oppression were members of the Chicano community itself. Although very few Chicanas were able to get their works published in the early years of the Chicano movement (Ikas 31), by the late 1970s, some tireless female authors managed to publish their writings in which they “emphasized their sense of being marginalized by the Chicanos themselves, their sense of being left behind” (Rebolledo and Rivero 22). In the early years of the Chicana canon, those who created the foundations for the much larger genre that was to come expressed deep disapproval of their culture’s strict enforcement of traditional gender roles demonstrating how these greatly limited the personal and professional opportunities for Chicana women. In her poem “Notes from a Chicana Co-ed,” Bernice Zamora demonstrates hypocrisies within the Chicano movement as it asked women to support the demand for better treatment from white society, but only insofar as it was granted to Chicano males. When the Chicana narrator (who constantly worries about providing for her children) confronts her lover about all the advantages he has: the money he receives from his G.I. bill, his docile wife with a job of her own, his four mistresses including herself, and the servility that’s bestowed upon him by the women in his life, he retorts

Don’t give me that  
 Women’s Lib trip, *mujer*,  
 that only divides us,  
 and we have to work  
 together for the *movimiento*;  
 the *gabacho* is oppressing us! (132).

The Chicano revolutionary in this poem demands to be equal to other white males, yet denies the need to grant females similar equality. Therefore, Zamora reveals that instead of fighting to end oppression, he simply wants to be given a different role to play, a role still entrenched within an oppressive society. It is evident, then, that this representative of the Chicano activist accommodates a Western ideological system that relies upon dualist power relations consisting of dominant and subordinate groups. With the help of *El Movimiento*, he demonstrates the desire to gain a status of sociopolitical dominance and to maintain that dominance over subordinate women.

Adding to the difficulties posed by the exclusion of women in groups like MEChA, gender expectations alone have demonstrated a serious obstacle for women with interests in political activism. In Chicano culture, the duties of daughters, mothers and wives demand extreme amounts of time and energy. While some women had the ability to participate in the sociopolitical activism during El Movimiento, many more who wished to be actively involved began to consider the ways in which traditional gender roles limited their potential. In poems such as “You Cramp My Style, Baby” and “Para un Revolucionario,” Lorna Dee Cervantes demonstrates how the luxuries of having free time, an education, and financial stability are unavailable to many Chicana women. In “Para un Revolucionario,” as the speaker listens to males gathered in the living room sharing dreams, aspirations, and ideological musings, she describes her obligations as a female that inhibit her ability to join: “Pero your voice is lost to me, *carnal*, / in the wail of *tus hijos*, / in the clatter of dishes / and the pucker of beans upon the stove” (151-2). Thus, while the literature and theories emerging from the Chicano movement in the 60s and 70s tended to focus thematically on politics, for Chicanas, the inequality inherent in traditional gender roles emerged as a major point of concern.

In response to their overt exclusion from the Chicano movement, and propelled by a growing understanding of the gender oppression exacted upon them, Chicana women turned to the second-wave feminist movement to find support in combating the oppression that they endured. As the feminist movement at this time explored the ways in which women were experiencing oppression within hegemonic society, they recognized the importance of addressing societal stereotypes regarding “the” female disposition and her capacities. Essentialist notions of gender identity were severely challenged, and feminists insisted, rather, that society is responsible for constructing gender roles and behaviors. Thus, feminists of this movement were intent on demonstrating that the qualities considered to be part of a woman’s “essence” were, in fact, socially constructed. In addition to their important work regarding essentialism, feminists at the time also popularized a theoretical slogan that greatly impacted the movements of many marginalized groups: “the personal is political.” This slogan and its implications were quickly adopted by many Chicana/o authors as their preferred theoretical approach to addressing themes relating to oppression and societal transformation. It suggests that society has an influence on everything including the realities of one’s own personal life and the dynamics of his or her romantic and familial relationships, the construction of gender roles, and even influences one’s inner most thoughts and ideological paradigms. Thus, “the personal is political” also advocates a strategy for societal change that begins with transformation of the self, and continues to work outward into society. In order to eradicate evidence of oppression, one must expose his or her mind and personal life to political analysis and critique, and make appropriate changes where oppression or oppressive mentalities are found.

With a look inwards Chicanas began to critically examine the primary activities, interactions, and concerns of their daily lives. Consideration of their “personal” lives as



byproducts of larger political realities produced nuanced understandings of their relationship with patriarchal structures, and Chicanas began to identify the various aspects of their realities that contributed to their objectification as females and the oppression they experienced. As descendants of indigenous peoples (the majority of whom were Aztec), Spanish-Catholic colonists, and White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) Americans,<sup>3</sup> Chicanas recognize that they are privy to a distinct brand of patriarchy, one that has been molded by ideologies and customs that are particular to each of these three societies and that continue to be shaped by the interplay of these cultures within Chicana/o communities. In *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*, Deborah Madsen explains that one's understanding of gender roles is intrinsically linked to his/her cultural identity:

For women, the experience of feminine sexuality is different according to ethnic or racial religious identity: Hispanic Catholicism, Oriental Confucianism, native religions, and black evangelical Christianity. Women in each racial group express the ways in which their individual experience of their sexuality is mediated by their racial identity. (3)

As predominantly working-class, Catholic, women-of-color of Mexican descent<sup>4</sup> who were typically raised in rural farming communities where labor was divided by gender lines (women working in the home and men working outside), the Chicana experience of gender oppression is unique to these, and other identifying features of their historical and geopolitical backgrounds.

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<sup>3</sup> While the heritage of each Chicana may vary (with possible combinations of biological heritage including, but not limited to, Aztec, Spanish, Anglo-American, and African ancestry), the three identity categories listed in the text (American indigenous peoples, Spanish-Catholic colonists, and WASP Americans) contribute most significantly to the makeup of Chicana/o culture.

<sup>4</sup> Although we often think of Mexican peoples as those living south of the Rio Grande, it is important to note that until 1848, Mexico stretched as far north as Oregon. Many Mexicans who happened to live north of the Rio Grande at the time of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo suddenly became foreigners on the land their families had lived on for generations (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 27-29).

Yet again, however, as Chicanas sought solidarity with a civil rights movement in the 60s and 70s, this time with the feminist movement, they soon discovered ineptitudes within the ideological frameworks of their peers. Similar to their observation of the attitudes within *El Movimiento*, Chicanas found that the main agenda of the second wave feminist movement was less focused on the need to dismantle the very nature of the subject/object duality, than on the desire to eradicate only specific forms of oppression, namely, oppression felt by white, middle-class women. The predominantly white feminist movement labeled the issues brought forth by Chicanas as cultural or economic concerns rather than feminist concerns, and thus, they largely refused to associate their own activism with the needs of women in the Chicano community. So, for example, while white-middle-class-educated women who enjoyed the ability to pursue careers might have identified pay equality as a primary concern for the feminist movement, they identified concerns brought forth by their sisters of color, such as the forced sterilization of women-of-color, the inaccessibility of low-cost health care for children, or the need for safe houses for victims of abuse, as strictly cultural or economic related issues. Anzaldúa explains that she witnessed white feminists “often acting as though their reality and ways of knowing are universal, not culturally determined... assum[ing] that feminist racialized ‘others’ share their same values and goals... As members of a colonized gender, they believe they’re experts on oppression and can define all of its forms; thus they don’t have to listen/learn from racial others” (“now let us shift” 564).<sup>5</sup> Failing to recognize their own privilege, thinking of their experiences

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<sup>5</sup> In the book *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras*, Anzaldúa further explains how the concerns of Chicana women were considered matters of class or race. Distinguishing her observations of the general mentality of predominantly white feminist groups from the race or ethnicity of the individual members of said groups, Anzaldúa uses the term whitefeminist. This term operates as an identifier for white, middle-class feminists who are concerned with gender oppression only as it relates to their own life experiences. She states, “Often whitefeminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians

as ones unmarked by culture or race, and regarding their own concerns with gender oppression as unrelated to socioeconomic status, many white feminists revealed the racism inherent in their mindsets. Though the second-wave-feminist movement of the 1960s illuminated the need to probe questions of gender equality within the U.S., the movement largely failed third world women-of-color.

Ostracism from both the activisms of their male brethren in *El Movimiento* and their white sisters in the feminist movement further entrenched Chicanas within the double bind of both racist and gender oppression. As Madsen states, “The exclusion of colored women from male-dominated civil rights organizations and the white-dominated women’s movement is seen as a continuation of this same tradition in which access to power takes priority over the redefinition of power relationships within American society” (2). And yet, Chicanas soon became emboldened by this double bind of oppression as it gave them a truly unique perspective from which to discuss and write about power dynamics. Anzaldúa asserts, “We notice the breaches in feminism, the rifts in Raza studies, the breaks in our disciplines, the splits in this country. These cracks show the flaws in our cultures, the faults in our pictures of reality. The perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity” (qtd. in Keating, “shifting worlds, una entrada” 3). As Chicanas have worked to understand the world from the vantage point of these societal “cracks,” they have considered themselves, and other third world women-of-color, to be integral to the development of new,

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and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of ‘differences,’ . . . they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity. Yet in their eager attempt to highlight similarities, they create or accentuate ‘other’ differences such as class. . . . In the act of pinpointing and dissecting racial, sexual or class ‘differences’ of women-of-color, whitewomen not only objectify these differences, but also change those differences with their own white, racialized, scrutinizing and alienating gaze” (xxi).

creative modes of thinking. Thus, in addition to exposing the ways in which *El Movimiento* and second wave whitewomen<sup>6</sup> feminism participated in the same oppressive mentalities they claimed to work against, Chicana theory and activism of the 70s and 80s also moved in a wholly new direction as it searched for solutions to dismantle the harmful dichotomies and dualities of Western society. Women who became part of Chicana activism, theory, and literature recognized the need for a “redefinition of power relationships” and began working to create a feminist activism and literary canon that was distinctly their own. Some of the most influential contributors to Chicana feminist theory have been Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Ana Castillo, Norma Alarcón, and Chela Sandoval. These theorists have expanded upon and modified previous theoretical assumptions to incorporate frameworks cognizant of the various interstices of oppression and influence on an individual’s life. As critic Aída Hurtado explains, “Chicana feminisms have pushed all theoreticians to expand their frameworks beyond race/ethnicity, gender, and class” (144).

Gloria Anzaldúa, the most influential of the Chicana theorists, is well-recognized within post-colonial, feminist, queer, and third world women-of-color studies and her work can be found in over a hundred different anthologies (Keating “From Borderlands and New Mestizas” 7). In the introduction to the second edition of Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking work, *Borderlands*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull writes, “This historically significant text continues to be studied and included on class syllabi in courses on feminist theory, contemporary American women writers, autobiography, Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, cultural studies, and even major American authors” (251). In this text, Anzaldúa describes the historical and mythic events that have

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<sup>6</sup> Just as Anzaldúa uses the term whitefeminist as one word, I use the single word “whitewomen” here to differentiate the racist and classist point of view of dominant feminist ideologies from the skin color. As AnaLouise Keating states, “‘whiteness’ is a state of mind—dualistic, supremacist, separatist, hierarchical” (*This Bridge We Call Home* 570).

contributed to the cultural climate of Chicana existence within U.S. society. She addresses issues of racism, misogyny, how to write as a marginalized individual, and the importance of enacting societal change. Speaking on behalf of Chicana women, she addresses an expectation she and others have of Chicano men stating, “we demand the admission/acknowledgement/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and our power” (105). Turning the focus to white society, she insists, “We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us, you erase our identity, and our experience because it makes you feel guilty” (107). While comprehensively identifying the oppression faced by Chicanas, Anzaldúa does not give up hope, instead insisting upon the endless possibilities of the future. Chela Sandoval, most known for her theoretical work *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), testifies: “Anzaldúa was a resolute theorist of hope” (*Entre Mundos/ Among Worlds* xiii).

Perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution made within *Borderlands* is the theory of *mestiza* consciousness in which Anzaldúa examines the Chicana’s psychological makeup. The psyche of the *mestiza*, she argues, is multicultural, split, divisive: it is reflective of the diversity, confusion, and turmoil that exist along the U.S.-Mexico border. The term “borderlands,” therefore, is used as a signifier for the heterogeneousness of the Chicana’s psyche. The *mestiza*, who emerges as “a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (100), is a site of cultural contact—the contradictions and oppositions of these two (or more) cultures are ever present in her daily life. As the *mestiza* realizes the ineptitudes of traditional identity categories to represent the complexities of her “self,” she must recognize that traditional identity categories are culturally constructed and in no way predetermine her life experiences or potential. *Mestiza* consciousness develops an

alternative understanding of identity which challenges the organization of society based on the ambiguous, indeterminate identity categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Anzaldúa envisions a world similar to the theory of Raza Cosmica which she calls “el mundo zurdo,” the left-handed world. She conceptualizes “el mundo zurdo” as a society composed of diverse peoples committed to the unending work towards establishing sociopolitical equality for all.

In order to develop mestiza consciousness, Anzaldúa argues that one must reject the myth of the monoculture, however stable it may seem, and enter the liminal state of *nepantla*: the space in-between multiple cultural paradigms. Navigating this space requires a “tolerance for ambiguity” (101) by recognizing that epistemes are not fixed; rather, they are flexible. In her psyche, opposing views converge or are considered simultaneously, and as she learns to harbor both views at once, their meanings shift. Her tolerance for ambiguity, allows seemingly incompatible forces to morph into networks of complex coexistence rather than combative opposites. Through this process, the mestiza learns that dualities may be transcended. Thus, “the work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (102). The mestiza’s work is never done, it is processual, continuous, for “[r]igidity means death” (101). Though this existence lacks stable ground, Anzaldúa argues that it possesses the creative power needed to dismantle the tools of oppression.

While the task of the mestiza is hopeful, it is demanding, and the conditions she faces are dire. Norma Alarcón contributes what she sees as the six most concerning realities facing Chicanas:

1) to choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all; 2) woman's abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/ emotional starvation occur even in the midst of tangible family; 3) woman is a slave, emotionally as well as economically; 4) women are seen not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable; 5) blind devotion is not a feasible human choice (this is further clarified by the telling absence of poems by women to the Virgin of Guadalupe, while poems by men to her are plentiful); 6) when there is love/ devotion it is at best deeply ambivalent." ("Chicana's Feminist Literature" 186)

In order to liberate themselves from these conditions, *mestizas* must find a means to redefine themselves and their positions within society, to see themselves as "contributors to the shaping of the world" ("Chicana's Feminist Literature" 187). Anzaldúa insists therefore, on developing an awareness of one's conditions. For the *mestiza*, the "first step is to take inventory.

*Despojando, degranando, quitando paja.* Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back—which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?" (104). This step is one of exposure: it forces the *mestiza* to scrutinize her history and the history of her people, bringing her face to face with the societal lies regarding her identity. As she continues on *el camino de la mestiza*, she embarks on the second step of her journey. She "reinterprets history ... shapes new myths ... adopts new perspectives" (*Borderlands* 104). Using these new perspectives, she redefines the self. As critic Deborah Madsen states, "self-definition offers an alternative to the stereotypes prescribed by a racist and sexist culture; the freedom of self-definition extends well beyond the freedom to name... and enables the [mestiza] to engage in actions and behaviors that are otherwise prohibited" (201). Thus, through reinterpretation and imaginative reconstruction, the *mestiza*

learns to transform the “small ‘I’ into the total Self” (*Borderlands* 105). The *mestiza* demonstrates that the “struggle is inner” (*Borderlands* 109) starting first in the in-between space, in nepantla, or the borderlands of the psyche.

In the works of Anzaldúa, Alarcón, and other Chicana theorists, the call for individuals to participate in a reinscription of identity demonstrates the strong relationship Chicana theory has had with the theoretical perspective that the personal is political. As Anzaldúa and Moraga state in *This Bridge Called My Back* “The revolution begins at home” (“Introduction, 1981.” xlvii). For Chicana feminists, this theoretical approach has also contributed greatly to their writing stylistics. Chicana theory has developed a “theory in the flesh,” an approach to theoretical writing that includes the autobiographical. As Moraga and Anzaldúa explain, “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (“Entering the Lives of Others” 19). Chicana theorists write viscerally, blending autobiographical stories of pain, loss, struggles, and joys into their theorizing. In an attempt to illuminate the injustices seen in the realm of the personal, they write with intimacy and honesty. While theory in the flesh has contributed to the development of theory based on lived experience rather than abstract musings, it is also considered by Chicana theorists to be a necessary step in actualizing theories of self-identification. Criticizing the inaccessibility of “high” theory, Chicana scholars believe that by presenting their theories within visceral autobiographical and fictional stories, their ideas and philosophies may reach wider audiences, audiences who can relate to similar experiences of physical, emotional, or psychic pain. Norma Alarcón insists, “we must work with literary, testimonial, and pertinent ethnographic materials to enable Chicanas to grasp their ‘I’ and ‘We’ in order to make effective political interventions” (qtd. in Perez 67). Due to the use of



autobiographical, intimate stylistics, Chicana theorists are celebrated for their contributions to academia and critical thought while simultaneously avoiding the objectifying distance theoreticians are known for.

The presence of multiple genres and artistic forms within the theoretical texts of the canon is mirrored in the genre bending qualities of Chicana literature as well. Here, personal artistic expression is consistently integrated with political and theoretical concerns. Chicana literature is characterized, then, by what Anzaldúa calls *autohistoria-téoria*. As she explains, “in our literature, social issues such as race, class, and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded” (“Haciendo Caras” xxvi). Critic Anna Marie Sandoval similarly concludes that in the works of Chicana authors, “the political/theoretical agenda... is often embedded in their narrative texts” (20). As Chicanas use literature to discuss theoretical and political concerns, they address a wide range of issues including cultural effacement, religion, racism, poverty, self-identification in a postmodern world, sexuality and sexual expression, culturally mandated gender roles, and most significantly, the presence and effects of misogyny and machismo culture within Chicano society.<sup>7</sup> While the protagonist offers a personal memoir, the incorporation of other genres,

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<sup>7</sup> Though Chicanas deftly critique the manifestations of patriarchy within their own culture, they also point out the racist blindness of white feminists who demonize Latino and Chicano males, claiming them to be the embodiment of misogyny. While Latino and Chicano cultures are certainly patriarchal, society is not bound by the same types of oppressive traditions as those typical of Anglo-American society. The role of the abuelita, or grandmother, for instance, is highly respected within Chicano society and her advice is greatly heeded. Furthermore, while Mexican women might not typically be breadwinners for a family, they often have control over the family’s expenditures. According to historian John Ingham, while men get allotted a small amount of drinking money, it is typical for women in Mexican families to have “a tight control over the purse” and “men who withhold money from their wives are said to be *cuentachiles* (chile counters)” (62). Lastly, in Mexico as well as other countries previously colonized by the Spanish, women could own property and litigate in court long before these rights were shared by women in the U.S. and Canada (Rebolledo and Rivero 3).

including history, myth, and theory, serves to simultaneously offer a collective memoir, connecting the experiences of the protagonist to larger cultural and historical conditions. Anzaldúa explains that autohistoria-téoria, “depicts both the soul of the artist and the soul of the pueblo” (qtd. in Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 183). Through storytelling, Chicana literature illustrates, and reflects upon, the social issues that threaten the livelihood and emotional well-being of present-day Chicanas.

Significantly, these theoretical and political representations are typically manifested through a female protagonist. As Ralph Rodriguez claims, the Chicana literary genre is “writing of women-defined women, female characters as presented by women” (70). Similarly, Deborah Madsen asserts that “the subject of Chicana writing *is* the Chicana subject: feminine subjectivity in a Mexican American context is the primary subject matter of Chicana literature” (5). As this genre began to take thematic shape in the late 70s and early 80s, , it developed “a distinctive feminine ethnic/racial voice... all reworked so that elements of a racial cultural tradition become expressive of a feminist voice instead of expressing traditional patriarchal Mexican values” (1). This feminist voice is often employed for one of two purposes: to expose the conditions in which Chicanas exist as society’s “other,” restricted from ever asserting autonomy or agency, or, to demonstrate the process in which a Chicana learns to break out of her restraints, reinterpret her condition, and redefine herself. According to Roland Walter, “Chicana writers have used the written word in order to ‘reveal’ and ‘change,’ that is, they have been engagé writers in one way or another” (81).

From personal biographies to fictional stories, texts that expose the conditions presented by patriarchal society release the valve on the pain and anguish endured by so many stifled

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women. These texts represent the first stage of *mestiza* consciousness in which the myths and traditions of hegemonic society are exposed to be the source of abuse, neglect, poverty, and misogyny that many Chicanas experience. Tragic endings and unresolved problems are certainly not uncommon in stories such as these. For example, in Helena Maria Viramontes' book of short stories, *Moths*, characters such as Amanda never see a change in their conditions. As Viramontes deftly exhibits in "The Long Reconciliation," patriarchal society fights to keep women subdued. When young Amanda shares her hardships with a priest, he contends "it is so hard being female, Amanda, and you must understand that that is the way it was meant to be" (89). The portrayal of Amanda's story gives the reader insight into her existence and the mentality of docility that she is encouraged to develop. While the characters themselves may remain servile and submissive, their stories elucidate to the reader the ways in which women are often treated within Chicana/o society.

In texts that demonstrate the second stage of *mestiza* consciousness female characters defy hegemonic norms and assert self-awareness. These texts represent an "overcoming of silence among Chicanas" (Madsen 227) as authors and protagonists alike learn to develop their own interpretations of the world and to assert a sense of self, liberated from the constraints of hegemonic society. In Cisneros' *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* she describes the options society presented to her, options which she rejected to become a writer: "A woman like me/ whose choice was a rolling pin or a factory / An absurd vice, this wicked wanton / writer's life" (Preface 23-25). Though Cisneros has been able to make a living from her writing career, and has become one of the most successful Chicano/a writers to date, her career is considered an absurd choice for a woman within the Chicano/a community, one far removed from the sanctioned options.

In its firm assertion of the importance of self-definition, much of Chicana literature documents this second stage of *mestiza* consciousness as a female protagonist awakens to her conditions, seeks to dig through the societal lies that have imprinted on her psyche and ultimately achieves a new consciousness that is constructed through self-definition. During this process, characters discover, often with great surprise, the extent to which their lives are pulled upon by oppositions. The very identity of Chicana encapsulates conflict: to what extent should one identify as Anglo, Mexican, Spanish, Aztec, or African? Held within each of these individual identifications lies a cultural prerogative that is often at odds with the others. While Anglo society may encourage American patriotism, the Aztec memory may remind a Chicana of her stolen land. Many Chicana authors demonstrate a commitment to progress by critically examining these contradictions, and their protagonists struggle to navigate these contradictions with various degrees of effectiveness. Within their literature, female characters often undergo a process during which they must discern which paradigms or beliefs are most compatible with the development of their health and prosperity. Rebolledo asserts, “Chicana writing is the need to explore and explode the stereotypes given to Chicanas—they have done this by emphasizing the realities of Chicana existence and the plurality of Chicana personalities” (23-4). As texts of exploration and self-discovery, Chicana literature contains many similarities with the bildungsroman in which one must overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to achieve the reward of growth and self-awareness. Though the process of self-discovery may be a difficult, painful, and often confusing journey, it is a necessary one as it ultimately enables honest self-expression and engenders tolerance and acceptance for the unique gifts offered by other Chicanas. Thus, the majority of work within the canon subverts male privilege by moving female subjectivity and stories of female self-discovery to center stage. The intimate quality of

the narrative is intended to create strong empathetic bonds with the reader, encouraging the reader to recognize the protagonist's subjectivity, and, for female readers, to possibly identify with her experiences and find the inspiration to similarly embark on a path to self-definition.

Because the Chicana literary genre often utilizes storytelling as a means to present readers with new theoretical, feminist perspectives, authors share an underlying assumption that literature has the capacity to create change within society. As literary females learn to take action, and learn to assert personal agency, many believe that this precedence has the power to encourage readers to take similar action. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa insists, "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). She emphasizes that the images that we create in our heads, must be images of a new reality, one that is different from that which currently exists. These imaginary visions of change use the pen, the paper, the canvas, the stage to come into being. Through creative acts, we can bring to life our visions for change. She states, "The acts of writing, painting, performing, and filming are acts of deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status quo. Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises. We build culture as we inscribe in these various forms" ("Haciendo Caras" xxiv). In a press release for one of her novels, Ana Castillo presents the same opinion stating, "I do believe that while we are laughing and crying when hearing stories we are being given lessons which we may choose to heed or not" (qtd. in Perez 62). Moreover, Moraga affirms, "We proceed with some infinite faith that if we say it, write it, walk it well enough that it will matter somehow—that spirit can be materialized as consciousness can be materialized" (*Xicana Codex* 174). Chicana authors continue to write with the belief that their words, their works, will offer

unique counter perspectives to the status quo, perspectives useful to anyone, especially Chicanas and other Third World women of color, asking more from the world they live in.

The belief that writing has the ability to affect change, that readers might feel ethically obligated to think or act differently after reading a text, makes quite a few presumptions about the relationship between text and reader. In Diane Fowlkes' essay regarding the feminist identity politics of Chicana literature, she points out that such writing presumes that "others similar to and different from [the author] both need and want to hear what it has taken for them to construct their own forms of intersubject" (120-1) <sup>8</sup> and will consider this knowledge to be useful in their own subject formation. Additionally, she argues that this kind of writing presumes that once others become aware of how their own lived realities "implicate them in oppressing both the writers and themselves, the others will feel a need and a desire to join the struggle to change structures that oppress some in part by privileging others in part" (121). While these presumptions assume a great deal regarding the reader's potential reaction to the text, Chicana writers continue to understand literature as a form of activism.

Perhaps the most inspirational evidence for many authors has come in the form of personal testimony as readers and writers alike have shared the impact that Chicana literature and theory has had on their personal lives and scholarship. In the foreword to the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga summarizes the sentiment of many readers who claimed that the writers and protagonists within the anthology "actually understood." Many readers wrote the anthologists with comments like the following: "Many of you put into words feelings I have had that I had no way of expressing.... The writings justified some of my thoughts telling me I

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<sup>8</sup> Fowlkes' term "intersubject" is synonymous with subjectivity asserted with careful consciousness of the various identities that interplay within the individual's psyche.

had a right to feel as I did” (*Foreword to Second Edition* 255). Norma Alarcón also argues “There is little doubt... that *Bridge* along with eighties writings by many women of color in the United States has problematized many a version of Anglo-American feminism and has helped open the way for alternate feminist discourses and theories” ( “The Theoretical Subjects” 29). Both scientific and anecdotal evidence have encouraged authors to consider their works as tools of provocation with the potential to transform readers’ views and behaviors.

Although Chicana theorists attribute creative works with the capacity to promote societal change, not all within the Chicana/o community were affected by the activist literature of the 70s and 80s. In talking about her father, Cisneros describes the lack of access by the greater Chicana/o community to the ideas held within literature. She identifies her father as part of a “public majority. A public who is disinterested in reading, and yet one whom [she is] writing about and for, and privately trying to woo” (qtd. in Rebolledo and Rivero 25). In “Marxism and the Chicano Movement,” Tatcho Mindiola observes that despite the works of theorists to provide holistic and innovative theoretical perspectives that challenge hegemonic norms, among Chicanas/os, “accommodation and integration into existing U.S. society are the prominent if not main ideological goals” (179). Even those who have been integral to the theoretical activism of Chicana literature have expressed dissatisfaction in the ability of their work to effectively produce widespread change. In 2002, Cherrie Moraga asserted “If anything accurately describes the Xicana story, it is the site of conflict and resistance; revolt but not revolution. Not yet” (*Xicana Codex* 35). Marcos Pizarro blames this on a dissolved activism: “the goals of community empowerment that represented our vibrancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s have been forgotten or deemed unrealistic” (150). In a 2008 interview, Ana Castillo remarked, “We still are far from a racist and sexist free world. The fact that there will be Latin@s who will vote

for McCain proves that despite the numbers, there is no such a thing as a Latino Movement today” (qtd. in Wehbe-Herrera, “The Power of a Query”). Pizarro similarly concludes that “Chicana/o Studies and its scholars are still struggling with the most basic issues introduced in the early 1970s” and claims “Chicana/o Studies is in a coma” (145). Aida Hurtado’s essay “Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms,” argues that the effectiveness of Chicana feminism has been limited as it has yet to appeal to Chicana women who align with more traditional values. She states “Chicana feminists have not always been successful... nor have their challenges been met with open arms by most members of Chicano communities” (147). All of these factors remain key concerns for the activism of contemporary Chicana feminism. In the current climate of society, in which the progress of affirmative action is being undone, women are still being denied full authority over their reproductive rights or adequate access to birth control, and many are opposing immigration reform, Hurtado argues that “the next phase of Chicana feminisms will have to be built on lived experience” (153) of all within the Chicana/o community.<sup>9</sup>

In looking for new theoretical perspectives that work to develop even more inclusive and socially effective activisms, we may turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s later works which have largely been overshadowed by the success of *Borderlands beginning in the late 80s*. “Haciendo Caras” (1990) and “now let us shift” (2002), in addition to many of Anzaldúa’s published interviews and speeches expand upon the theory of mestiza consciousness and elaborate upon the extensive work involved in identity transformation to better illustrate how the individual may contribute to larger societal transformation. While *Borderlands* largely discusses the process of

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<sup>9</sup> Hurtado suggests, for example, that Chicana feminisms consider the ways in which Chicano gay men subvert patriarchal norms within their communities.



disassociation—the rejection of both hegemonic ideologies and traditional identity categories—Anzaldúa’s theories of *nepantleras*, *nos/otras*, *conocimiento*, and *spiritual activism* expand upon and outline methods for the subsequent steps of identity reconstruction, the formulation of new paradigms, and the improvement of societal order. These theories provide inclusive, holistic methodologies for change and elucidate how change moves through the individual to affect society at large.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa repeatedly reminds readers that the initial projects of mestiza consciousness outlined within the text only partially respond to individual and societal needs.<sup>10</sup> While Anzaldúa herself considered *Borderlands* to be “just one project of this overall umbrella project that is [her] life’s work” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 268), critical interpretations of her work often oversimplify her theory of mestiza consciousness by focusing too closely on the two preliminary steps toward change: disassociation from oppressive ideologies, and the active, inward-looking redefinition of self. In part because of the response to her work that excessively concentrated on these two aspects of mestiza consciousness, Anzaldúa decided to utilize different terms in her later theories. In regards to her term “*nepantla*,” for example, she explains, “I found that people were using ‘Borderlands’ in a more limited sense than I had meant it. So to elaborate . . . I’m now using ‘*nepantla*’” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 176). AnaLouise Keating, a scholar devoted to the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, has much to say about the inattention to the later works of this foundational Chicana theorist, works which “interact with, expand on, and in

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of places within *Borderlands* indicating Anzaldúa’s stance that the development of mestiza consciousness should include more than just individual self-definition: “one day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place” (85), “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (102), “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes” (100-1).

other ways enrich Anzaldúa's better known theories of the borderlands" ("From Borderlands and New Mestizas" 8). Keating argues that these theories "have not yet received the attention they merit" ("From Borderlands and New Mestizas" 8), and that inattention to these theories leaves "what Anzaldúa might call 'blank spots' that prevent us from grasping the radical nature of her vision for social change and the crucial ways her theories have developed since the 1987 publication of *Borderlands*" ("shifting worlds, una entrada" 4).

In a significant shift of nuance, Anzaldúa's theories of *nos/otras*, *nepantla*, *conocimiento*, spiritual activism, and *nepantleras* insist that individuals alone cannot implement widespread change without listening, collaborating, compromising, and sharing with others, *including* those most aligned with the hegemonic order. These theories emphasize that the inner work of self-actualization as outlined in *Borderlands* must develop concurrently with public work to provide better environments for the self and for others. This public work is only effective insofar as it seeks "inclusionary multicultural alliances for social justice" (Keating "shifting worlds, una entrada" 2). In order to dismantle the essentialist conceptions of identity that limit both the potential of the individual and his or her ability to understand the "other," Anzaldúa illustrates her theory of *nos/otras*. In Spanish, while *nos* means "us," and *otras* means "other," together, the word *nosotras*, with a feminine inflection, means "we." Her theory of *nos/otras* advocates an understanding of humans as bound to one another as part of a relational and singular unit dependent on one another in order to understand and communicate the unique qualities of each individual. Thus, while *nos/otras* connects "us" and "other," it does so without erasing difference. Rather than position the "us" and the "other" in essentialist categories of difference, Anzaldúa provides a dialogic theory that emphasizes the interplay of difference *and* similarity between these two positions. Much like the yin and the yang in Chinese philosophy where two

inherently unique energies are still considered to be naturally bonded, human difference is not perceived singularly but as part of an interactive and all-encompassing social chemistry.

Similar to her theory of the “borderlands,” Anzaldúa’s theory of *nepantla* emphasizes the transformative power in the dynamic interplay of “us” and “them” or any other grouping of sides thought to be opposite. As one focuses not on the differences between two comparative sides but on the similarities necessarily present between seemingly antithetical realities, identities, or paradigms, this in-between space will reveal new transformative perspectives. It is in this space, the space of *nepantla*, the space illustrated by the forward slash in *nos/otras*, the place that combines oppositions, that Anzaldúa finds the ability to dismantle dualisms. She argues that through the discovery of similarities within opposites, through the bricolage of two seemingly opposing sides, it is possible to discover new paradigms capable of transforming societal relations. *Nepantla*, then is an ungrounded space, far removed from *terra firma*, and full of potential.

In order to enter *nepantla*, to pull one’s self out of archaic, inflexible world views that consider difference to be negative, or insist upon human difference to validate the disparate treatment of various peoples, one must embark on the path of *conocimiento*, a path that seeks new ways of knowing and considers consciousness as formulated by history, experience, perspective, dreams, education, information from the sense organs, and more. This path of knowing requires that individuals take inventory of the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and psychical abilities have shaped their experiences and their opportunities within society. Each individual, then, must work to reshape his or her definition of self, to challenge stereotypes regarding identity, and to resist conformity to dogmatic world views. Above all, the individual carrying *conocimiento* seeks to eliminate both emotional and material

sources of pain through the development of new holistic perspectives. By moving away from subjective, narrow-minded worldviews, individuals that seek *conocimiento* recognize identity to be an “experience of reality from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not... a fixed feature of personality or identity” (“now let us shift” 548). Thus, *conocimiento* reveals racial, ethnic, gender, and other identity categories to be meaningful only as they describe the ways in which humans interact with one another. This theory posits all groups within the human species to be relationally dependent on one another and argues that despite culturally constructed divisions, all human beings are connected to one another in a vast network of interdependence. Furthermore, the theory of *conocimiento* insists that in addition to the interconnectedness of all human life, humanity is further related to and dependent upon the existence and survival of all other life forms.

Anzaldúa’s theory of *spiritual activism* depends upon the realizations made through the path of *conocimiento* and employs an ethical position of social and environmental activism. As individuals discover their connectedness to all living things, the material interdependence of every natural species and the spiritual connectedness of life energy, Anzaldúa argues that individuals will determine it to be in their own personal best interest to protect the livelihood of all peoples, animals, and nature. Spiritual activism argues that if one damages any part of the vast network of life, this action would retroactively harm the very foundation for that individual’s existence. As a natural extension of respect and concern for the self, Anzaldúa determines that one must employ spiritual activism by building alliances across apparent divides and by fighting for the rights and proper treatment of all living things. Through the development of *nos/otras* perspective, the dedication to the path of *conocimiento*, and the employment of spiritual activism, one may become a *nepantlera*, a maker of bridges who forms links between

oppositions, creates alliances, and provides the foundation upon which a new, more equitable and peaceful society can be built.

Having elucidated the goals, achievements, and ongoing struggles of the Chicana canon, I now turn to the works of Ana Castillo in order to illustrate the ways in which her texts contribute to the activism and theoretical perspectives of this literary genre. In examining Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) and *The Guardians* (2007), I use Anzaldúa's theories to discuss some of the more prevalent aspects of these novels that are uncharacteristic of traditional Chicana literature. Through analysis of Castillo's portrayal of males, her illustration of spirituality, and the presentation of the relationship between female characters and their communities, I argue that instead of focusing on the development of *mestiza* consciousness (as seen in most other Chicana works), Ana Castillo's works function as *nepantleras*, creating bridges across divides and illustrating visions for societal change. While the development of *mestiza* consciousness is still crucial to the characters within Castillo's work, and to Chicana feminism, these novels herald a transition of thematic focus towards societal acceptance and systemic change.

In chapter one, I describe the typical portrayals of males within the Chicana canon, why these portrayals have developed, and how they have been used to highlight the obstacles that females face while attempting subject-constitution. After illustrating how Castillo's male characters are given more positive attributes and considerably more exposure than typical male characters in the canon, I utilize Anzaldúa's theory of *nos/otras* to demonstrate how Castillo's work avoids essentializing the "other" and illustrates the potential for constructive cross-gender relations. In chapter two, I discuss how many within the Chicana/o community have responded negatively to the work of Chicana feminism as activists and authors alike have been criticized for abandoning the Chicana/o community's cultural foundations, in particular, its practice of

Catholicism. I demonstrate that through the processual and connective qualities of *conocimiento*, Castillo's characters are able to validate the importance of spirituality and to highlight similarities between the practices and beliefs of traditional Catholic Chicanas/os and those of politicized, feminist females. Finally, in the third chapter, I discuss the tendency in the Chicana genre for female characters to leave home—for the process of developing *mestiza* consciousness to be one that occurs away from family and community. In actuality and in literature this dislocation from community is portrayed to be painful, yet necessary as Chicana feminists feel unaccepted by their traditional families and communities. I argue that through the deployment of *spiritual activism*, Castillo's characters are able to achieve their full potential while remaining within their communities offering visions for simultaneous personal and collective transformation. Without totally abandoning the genre's efforts to expose and challenge agents and ideologies of oppression, the methods Castillo uses to demonstrate and encourage social change in these works is that of alliance building. As *nepantleras*, or bridgemaakers, the novels *So Far* and *Guardians* bring Chicana literature and consciousness into a new phase, continuing forward on the arduous road toward the mundo zurdo vision.

## CHAPTER II

### BRIDGING ACROSS GENDER DIVIDES: DISMANTLING ESSENTIALIST

#### UNDERSTANDINGS OF IDENTITY THROUGH NOS/OTRAS

*So Far* and *Guardians* feature the voices and experiences of numerous characters as they struggle not only to survive, but to *thrive* within the challenging economic, environmental, and sociopolitical milieu of the U.S. Southwest. In *So Far*, an omniscient narrator tells the stories of a strong-willed mother named Sofi, her afflicted yet gentle husband Domingo, and their four (mostly) remarkable daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and Loca. In addition to giving the perspective of these five family members, the narrator also relates the experiences and contemplations of a respected local healing woman named Doña Felicia, as well as those of her godson, the religiously ascetic Francisco el Penitente. In *Guardians*, four different narrators channel the progression of the story including a widowed and solitary woman named Regina, her gracious nephew Gabo, her sociopolitical and eco-activist love interest, Miguel, and Miguel's wise and nurturing grandfather Milton. As these characters recurrently enter the spotlight within their respective novels, they continually dislocate reliance upon any singular vantage point from which to understand the events that take place. The various characters contribute to a collective multi-perspective in which each is responsible for generating meaning or propelling the narratives of the texts. This narrative style radically differs from most texts within the Chicana canon which tend to feature only one protagonist and avoid the inclusion of male perspectives outright. By featuring male perspectives *So Far* and *Guardians* offer alternative and inclusive literary methodologies that challenge the power dynamics of the subject-object dichotomy and avoid creating an essentialized "other" for the sake of privileging the self. These works offer

innovative understandings of Chicana activism and how it relates to the ongoing struggle for gender equality..

Criticism of gender inequality is inextricably linked to the work of Chicana authors. In the 1970s, as Chicana activists began to examine the manifestations of gender inequality in their lives, they began to write extensively about a male behavioral comportment known as *machismo*. The word *machismo*, which is derived from the Spanish word *macho* for male, describes the way in which men might behave to pronounce their masculinity. In contrast to all things considered feminine, the machismo male is controlling, individualistic, aggressive, proud, emotionally detached, strong, powerful and often violent. The presence of these characteristics in many Chicano males has led a number of Chicanas to become untrusting of the male sex. As Deborah Madsen states, in the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, as well as other Chicana activists and writers, the “attitude toward men and the patriarchal culture that shapes masculinity is adversarial” (198). In short, “men are represented as the enemy” (Madsen 198).

There have been many different attempts to describe the origins and development of the hyper-masculinity of *machismo* behavior and to understand why it is so commonplace within the Chicano community. According to anthropologist John M. Ingham, it is likely that a number of factors have contributed to the development of *machismo*, dating all the way back to the Aztec Empire. He suggests that this conduct may have its “roots in the feudal and warlike orientations of the Aztec and sixteenth-century Spanish cultures, and the conquistadors’ practice of taking Indian wives” (56). He also adds that long periods of peasant society, when gender roles were strictly enforced as a means to divide labor and regulate reproduction, may have contributed to the formation of typified and traditional gender performance. Perhaps the most widely discussed explanation for the development of *machismo* behavior, however, has roots in psychoanalytic



theory. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexicano theorist Octavio Paz asserts that *machismo* behavior is a defense mechanism—a reaction to the denial of mexico-indio subjectivity within dominant culture. Continually reminded of their powerlessness in a postcolonial society, and of their subordinate position in the sociopolitical order, Paz argues that Chicano and Mexicano men retaliate against the only people over whom they may dominate—Chicana and Mexicana women. Although Chicana authors may feel sympathy for their male counterparts and the oppression that they face, they contend that the *machismo* related abuse that is inflicted upon Chicanas is not at all justified. In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Anzaldúa insists “though we ‘understand’ the root causes of male hatred and fear, and the subsequent wounding of women, we do not excuse, we do not condone, and we will no longer put up with it” (105).<sup>11</sup>

One place in which Chicana women began to recognize the exercise of misogynistic perspectives was in the literature of their male counterparts. Due to the patriarchal nature of Chicano society, males are able to express their subjective selves—to express the feelings, ideas, beliefs, opinions, tastes, and desires derived from their own intellect and perspectives—as a birthright within their families and communities. Thus, male authors and activists who contributed to Chicano literature in the 1960s were largely accustomed to speaking their minds, engaging in intellectual discourse, and exploring hobbies and talents. As it is considered culturally acceptable for males to express their thoughts and desires, Yvonne Yarbo-Bejerano states, “[M]ale writers take for granted the assumption of the subject role to explore and understand self” (qtd. in Madsen 215). Hence, male characters within Chicano literature are diverse and typically assertive and subjective

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<sup>11</sup> While the ways in which Chicana literature establishes and discusses machismo behavior is integral to this work, a full analysis of how and why machismo behavior has developed would be an extensive project and is not central to the work at hand.

While Chicano literature accounted for dynamic male characters, the portrayal of women was often stereotypical. The female characters represented in Chicano literature tended to be pigeonholed as service oriented and one-dimensional. Literary archetypes, of the female caregiver and female home maker pervade the Chicano canon. As a one-dimensional character, the woman's only function in much of Chicano literature is to, in one way or another, serve the male. In an interview with Karin Ikas, author Lorna Dee Cervantes discusses the way in which women are often stereotyped in Chicano works. She noted that in Chicano culture of the 60s and 70s, "Men dominated, especially literature as well . . . they were all men, and I could see all the stereotypes of women there. Just to give you one example: There is the stereotype of the mother who never sleeps but is awake till 4 A.M. and slaps tortillas for everybody" (qtd. in Ikas 31-2).

In critiquing the representation of female characters as one-dimensional archetypes, as passive compliments to the active male agent, Denise Chávez illustrates the absurd degree of reverence with which females are expected to serve their male partners in the poem "I Am Your Mary Magdalene." The protagonist's identification with the biblical character of Mary Magdalene ridicules the extent to which females are encouraged to embody spiritual, worshipful piety in relation to their husbands or lovers. While Chicanas are expected to emulate the behavior of biblical women, Chávez demonstrates that males have the liberty to behave how they please, in manners far from Christ-like. The protagonist, who is emotionally wounded by her lover, informs the reader "I have had to apologize / .... wouldn't know / it would be this way" (Chavez 78). And though her lover was cruel, the protagonist further illustrates the expectation that *she* be responsible for reparations as she (perhaps sarcastically) suggests "come, let me wash your feet / stroke your brow" (78). Activists and authors such as Chavez criticize Chicano literature for endorsing the representation of women as one-dimensionally servile and wholly dependent on

their male relationships. In an interview, Cervantes describes her work as a direct response to the Chicano representation of females as servile, non-thinking non-agents. She explains that her book of poetry *Emplumada* “came out of the need to document [her] experience, a woman-centered experience, and to counteract this expression of what the Chicano family was, with this patriarch, and mama’s in the kitchen slapping tortillas. The whole book was in reaction and resistance to that” (qtd. in Madsen 211).<sup>12</sup>

Although representations of the female in Chicano work throughout the 1960s and early 70s reflected the one-dimensional patriarchal perspective of the female, by the mid-70s,<sup>13</sup> the development of the female-written Chicana genre led to diverse depictions of Chicana subjectivity. Critic Ewelina Krok states “The appearance of a Chicana fiction, as distinct from Chicano literature, is related to an emphasis on feminist concerns” (263). Thus, the works of Chicana authors challenged the discursive practices of their male counterparts. In speaking out against the cultural and literary portrayal of women in objectified ways, Emma Pérez wrote, “We have not had our own language and voice in history. We have been spoken about, written about, spoken at but never spoken with or listened to” (qtd. in Rebolledo and Rivero 26). As a means to be spoken with, listened to, Chicana literature amplifies female voices by creating worlds that almost exclusively portray a female protagonist within the context of her female relationships. As author Anna Marie Sandoval states, “Chicanas write against a national discourse that does not recognize them” and do so through the “development of women-centered spaces” (8). Chicana anthologists Tey Rebolledo and Eliana Rivero affirm, “in literature, Chicanas’ world perspectives are shaped and determined by their immediate female kin and the values they

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<sup>12</sup> Cervantes specifically identifies the poem “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” as one that reacts to and rejects the portrayal of the females in Chicano literature.

<sup>13</sup> “Many Chicana texts were not published until the mid-1970s” (Rebolledo and Rivero 22).

embody, and in addition male figures seem to take a secondary place” (111). Chicana literature, then, dismantles essentialist notions of Chicana identity through the portrayal of a female subjectivity, while female centric casts shift power dynamics to accentuate the legitimacy of female perspective. Yarbo-Bejarano insists, “The fact that Chicanas may tell stories about themselves and other Chicanas challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority” (qtd. in Quinn-Sanchez 81). Through centralized focus on female narratives, Chicana literature creates the space from which women are able to redefine their cultural experiences.

As this literature focuses on the subjectivity-creation of the female, males are seldom present. Because “theorizing about social change comes from everyday interaction with representatives of repressive institutions” (Hurtado 146), however, males that are present in these novels are often cast in a negative light. Serving as an example of the conditions of Chicana existence or as a catalyst sparking female redefinition of self, men are often depicted as archetypes of the *macho* Chicano, or of *machismo* behavior. Rebolledo and Rivero state that in much of Chicana literature “male figures, especially the fathers, were either present in their writing as violent characters or were absent from it altogether” (27). Males that *are* seen within Chicana literature, exemplify cross-gender interaction as a source of trauma, frustration, and even physical harm for Chicanas. This mode of characterization connects the individual experiences of Chicana protagonists to the more universal concerns regarding gender inequality in Chicana/o culture. Thus, male characters within the Chicana canon typically embody one or more of the following archetypes: the authoritarian father/husband, the violent male typically

prone to alcoholism,<sup>14</sup> or the emotionally distant and unattached male who has no consideration for the emotional pain he inflicts on others.

The archetype of the authoritarian male is often presented as a father figure<sup>15</sup> who insists on controlling and monitoring the youth of the family in order to ensure conformity to gender roles. When males are present within the household, “mostly they are seen setting up rules and imparting discipline” (Rebolledo and Rivero 111). Demanding strict adherence to gender roles from all within the household, authoritarian males impose extra severe restrictions upon women.<sup>16</sup> Women are expected to heed the desires of their fathers, brothers, and sons at all costs, with the readiness and willingness to sacrifice personal needs in order to ensure those of the males in the household are met. In addition, men use their authority to manipulate the opportunities that women are exposed to and to ensure that all females become experienced in a life of servitude towards men. Outdoor excursions, the pursuit of careers and spending idle time on amusements, athletics, or education<sup>17</sup> is strictly forbidden.

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<sup>14</sup> Though many Chicana authors primarily discuss the manifestations of the machismo need for control and dominance in terms of its direct impact in the home, these machismo traits are also explored regarding their effects on nature. In Alma Villanueva’s poems “I Sing to Three Sons” and “View From Richmond Bridge,” she describes the attempts by males to manipulate and control nature itself.

<sup>15</sup> As María Herrera-Sobek also asserts, “the father figure is often portrayed as a strong, patriarchal figure” who seldom is seen in a sentimental light (37).

<sup>16</sup> In describing gender relations within Mexican culture, Ingham states “women and children are deemed to be weaker than men and so more vulnerable to abuse and evil forces. They are expected to remain at home and to venture out only in the company of trusted companions or under parental supervision” (60).

<sup>17</sup> Bernice Zamora’s “father forbade reading in the house and placed pressure upon her to leave school as soon as the law allowed, though her mother struggled to keep her in school” (Madsen 42). In Helena Maria Viramontes’ essay “Nopalitos,” she discusses how her father attempted to pull her out of high school in order to work for the family. She describes her family structure and her father’s domination stating “if my mother was the fiber that held a family together, it was my father who kept snapping it with his oppressive cruelty” (34).

Male exertion of control in the childhood home and insistence on servitude from females are explored in Sandra Cisneros' vignette "Alicia Who Sees Mice." In this story, Alicia is the only female in her home after her mother has passed away. As a university student, she has the potential to achieve upward economic mobility, yet her father disregards her abilities and intelligence. Though she must take "two trains and a bus" to get to her university classes, her father insists that she wake up early enough to complete all domestic tasks for their household (*The House on Mango Street* 31). He reminds Alicia that no matter what she does, her first priority is to cook and clean for him and maintains, "A woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star... and make the lunchbox tortillas" (*The House On Mango Street* 31). Other Chicana texts discuss the ways in which young girls are expected to put the needs of brothers before their own. Nancy Sternbach demonstrates the pervasiveness of this reality in Mexican/Chicano cultures when she states, "Mexican wifely duty means that sons are favored, husbands revered" (55). In an autobiographical collection of essays entitled *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, Cherrie Moraga recalls, "I was required to make my brother's bed every day since I was old enough to do it and even after that day when I found his sheets stiff and spotted wet with his own silent dreamings. I would say that I learned early on that I was put on the planet to witness in him the life I would never have" (63). In fiction, male relatives in the childhood home are similarly portrayed as obstacles to female agency by demanding the complicit service and obedience of daughters, sisters, and mothers alike.

In addition to controlling the daily tasks and opportunities of females the authoritarian male archetype also demonstrates a keen interest in monitoring and limiting female sexual activity. In Viramontes' story "Growing," she demonstrates the constant supervision under which young women must learn to navigate their lives. When the fourteen year old Naomi begins

her menstruation, she is no longer allowed to play with the neighborhood children or even exit the house without the supervision of her younger sister: “It was Apá who refused to trust her, and she could not understand what she had done to make him so distrustful. *TÚ ERES MUJER*, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument, any question, because he said those words not as a truth, but as a verdict” (36). Naomi enjoyed freedom as a preadolescent child, yet her father considers her budding sexuality as a problem that must be contained, even punished. While “Growing” demonstrates the ways in which father figures suppress female sexuality, many texts also explore how males may even suppress the sexuality of their own partners. As John Ingham notes, in Mexican society, “men may deliberately avoid arousing their wives sexually fearing that arousal may encourage promiscuity” (56). Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek* both depict female lovers who are locked inside the home by their male partners,<sup>18</sup> under strict commands not to wander out.<sup>19</sup> Fearing the possibility of becoming a victim of adultery, these males choose to regulate their partners rather than to build a relationship based on communication and trust.

The machismo need for control even manifests itself in the attempt to control the sexual orientation and practices of females.<sup>20</sup> Regarding lesbianism as a challenge to their control, many male characters even resort to violence in an effort to drive out lesbian behavior. In Cherrie Moraga’s play *The Hungry Woman*, she imagines a future in which the Chicano

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<sup>18</sup> In the story “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cléofilas is rarely let out of the house and when she ultimately decides to leave her abusive husband, she must secretly rely on the help of others just to get to the bus station. Similar representations of female imprisonment in the home are also seen in Viramontes’ *Moths and Other Stories*.

<sup>19</sup> As Madsen states, “It is no accident, then, that the house provides a controlling metaphor in *The House on Mango Street*” (127) as a woman moves from her father’s house to her husband’s house and is required to be of service to these males for the entirety of her life.

<sup>20</sup> “Machismo upholds an ideal in which women are venerated as de-sexed mothers leading men to value the virgin bride” (Vidal 82).

community has secured a nation to call their own. Located in what once was the U.S. Southwest, this new nation is named Aztlán.<sup>21</sup> Though Chicanos and Chicanas alike strive together for the formation of Aztlán, males soon oust their female comrades from political positions and exile all lesbians. In this work, Moraga skillfully describes male fear of losing control over female sexuality and the lengths to which they are willing to punish females who don't abide by heterosexual cultural norms. Though the Chicano/indio/mexico state of Aztlán has been illustrated in many texts before, Moraga invokes this thematic representation of a "clean slate" in order to demonstrate how Chicano males alone are held responsible for their misogyny. Even within the context of a setting where there is no racism or imperialism, the Chicano has to account for his own participation in oppressive behavior.

Violence as a means of punishment and domination also characterize the machismo male.<sup>22</sup> Several texts discuss the severity with which men turn to abuse in their households, leading to the physical brutalization of women and children. Deborah Madsen observes that in the work of Denise Chavez, "Femininity is associated with pain, suffering and death; masculinity is associated with violence and abuse" (150). Viramontes' story "Cariboo Cafe," illuminates the impact of male violence on a washerwoman and her small family and how the consequences of this violence extend first into her community itself and then far into other regions of the world like fast-spreading toxic fumes. When the washerwoman's five and a half year old son is arrested, kidnapped, and falsely accused of being a spy for political rebels, she refuses to believe

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<sup>21</sup> Many in the Chicano community advocated for the establishment of a nation-state called Aztlán during *El Movimiento*. The proposed geographical location of Aztlán was to encompass land that was at one time inhabited by the Aztec people (Christie and Gonzalez 49).

<sup>22</sup> The brutality of domestic abuse in Chicana works is not glossed over as many authors understand the grave consequences it can have. In "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," Cervantes describes a woman's attempts for solitude after nearly being killed by her lover (231-232).



the signs, however obvious they may be, that her son has been murdered. Crushed by the indifference of men on both sides of the fight, she cries “we try to live as best we can, under the rule of men who rape women, then rip their fetuses from their bellies . . . Don’t these men have mothers, lovers, babies, sisters?” (75). In this passage, Viramontes clearly equates the violence of the war with the hyper-masculinity of patriarchal society. As Rebolledo and Rivero explain, males in Chicana literature are “not only authoritatively repressive, they are frankly abusive. A common father image is that of a drunk returning home late at night, hitting, screaming, disturbing the peace” (111).<sup>23</sup>

The final archetype of the machismo male that commonly manifests in Chicana works is that of the apathetic male. In Chicano culture, emotive or affectionate men are perceived as lacking in machismo. Thus, Chicana texts also explore the tendency for males to be emotionally distant, to betray and to desert lovers and families. In coming-of-age texts, many young girls and young women are raised by single mothers, as their fathers have abandoned them.<sup>24</sup> A lack of empathy or respect for their wives or partners leads many men to inflict emotional pain without remorse. In Mexican society, Ingham asserts that it is common for men to “seek extramarital sexual gratification ‘in the street’” (60). In romantic relationships, men constantly wander astray, enjoying the company of mistresses, prostitutes, and even second families. To some women, relationships between Chicanas and Chicanos seem irredeemable, as trust can never become fully developed. Madsen notes that “[b]etrayal is an ever-present possibility against which Cervantes can never relax her guard. Many of the poems collected in *From the Cables of*

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<sup>23</sup> For further examples of male violence in Chicana literature, see “South Sangamon,” by Sandra Cisneros, “View from Richmond Bridge,” “I sing to three sons,” “to my brothers,” and *Naked Ladies* by Alma Villanueva, and “Uncle’s First Rabbit,” “Lots: I,” “Lots: II” and “For Virginia Chávez,” by Lorna Dee Cervantes.

<sup>24</sup> See Cherrie Moraga’s *Hungry Ghost*.

*Genocide* express a negative, at times despairing view of the chances for enduring relationships with men” (199). While betrayal causes heartbreak and disenchantment, it may also lead to a reestablishment of values, where the female protagonist learns to redefine her identity outside of her relationships to the males in her life. The negative archetypes of males within the Chicana canon help provide the context in which female protagonists examine or reshape their realities.

While Chicano literature uses female archetypes from a position of power, their works maintain male ownership of the subjective self and enforce female servility. From the position of the oppressed, the works of Chicana authors utilize male archetypes in order to challenge the male claim to subjectivity. Their methods dismantle the norm in a tactic Luce Irigaray calls “disruptive excess.” As Pearce-Gonzalez explains, where there is an excess of male superiority, then, Chicanas employ female-centric narratives and negative male archetypes to combat the “‘disruptive excess’ present in the logic of patriarchy itself” (Pearce-Gonzalez 13) with a *feminized* “disruptive excess.” The prolific use of these archetypes in Chicana literature emphasizes the alternative role that female characters play as thinking, feeling subjects.

In her texts *So Far From God* and *The Guardians*, Ana Castillo utilizes peripheral male characters to demonstrate the archetypes common to the canon. Complicating the traditions of the canon, however, Castillo creates sympathetic male characters who play significant roles within the narrative of the text. Though these male characters are not presented without flaws, they are non-archetypal and multi-dimensional, disrupting the female-centrism that has come to be expected within Chicana narratives. Castillo’s utilization of male characters is largely unfamiliar to the Chicana canon, however, I contend that her works do not contribute to the tradition or continuation of male domination of the subjective voice within literature or within Chicana/o culture. Feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde

provide ideological frameworks that demonstrate how Castillo's portrayal of male characters contributes to an even stronger understanding of the genre's dedication to anti-essentialism. By using detailed backstory of male characters, illustrating the male perspective through narrative voice, and presenting epiphanic moments of change in her male characters, Castillo's works further the project of dismantling essentialist notions of gender and illustrate possibilities for positive gender relations.

In both *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo uses many peripheral male characters to illustrate the aforementioned machismo male archetypes. Consistent with other works within the Chicana genre, her works draw attention to the prevalence of machismo behavior and the negative consequences it has on females. In *So Far*, the mother, Sofia reflects upon her youth, and remembers the authoritative behavior of her father, who closely monitored all of her interactions with males, doubting her capacity to make good judgments regarding the suitors she would accept. Sofia's daughters Fe and Esperanza have the unfortunate experience of falling in love with men who cannot seem to love them back, who cannot access their true emotions. After Fe's fiancé Tom breaks off their engagement by sending her a note saying, "It's not that I don't love you. I do. I always will. But I just don't think I'm ready to get married" (30), La Loca prays for him and predicts "in a few years he would probably look for a new novia to marry while no one... not even himself, would know that he was still suffering from the inability to open his heart" (32). The most frighteningly *macho* character in *So Far* is Francisco el Penitente, "who, the more he prayed, the more raveled as tumbleweed he got about [Caridad]—was further disconcerted that he couldn't get Caridad to so much as acknowledge his presence" (198). Francisco's extreme religiosity reinforces his pretensions to authority over Caridad as he subscribes to the patriarchal underpinnings of the Catholic Church that position males as

dominant and females as subordinate. The belief in male preeminence over the female causes Francisco to be unable to take “no” for an answer, and Francisco becomes so deranged by his inability to control Caridad’s sexuality that he is ultimately driven to violence and suicide.

In *Guardians*, the threat of violence looms heavy over the town of Cabuche, a U.S./Mexico border town plagued by poverty, pollution, and predatory gang activity. The mixture of selfishness, emotional emptiness, and violence that pervades patriarchal society and is embodied by the machismo stereotype proves lethal in a city at the precipice of two nations. As Miguel explains the stakes in this borderland town, he informs the reader that “most of the cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and the raw methamphetamine consumed in the United States enters by land from south of the border. México is next to the world’s biggest drug market and the world’s biggest weapon supplier” (149). Thus, *Guardians* contains archetypes of the machismo male in an environment ripe with gangs, drugs, violence, desperation, and poverty. The gang members Jesse and Toro whom Gabo recruits to help find his father are hardened criminals who seem to have no empathy in their souls and are driven to violence simply as a means to prop up their *machismo* image. These young men commit acts of violence against women within their own community. As Gabo describes “when a chava gets brought into the gang it is truly a tragic fate cast upon a female... a girl throws a pair of dice and whatever number comes up, that is the number of guys who will have sex with her that night... [she is] raped by kids who told [her] that they were going to be [her] ‘familia’ from now on” (44). The brutal behavior of these young men and young boys, however extreme, is emblematic of the male needs to control and dominate which are represented by so many Chicana authors. Though not a gang member, Miguel’s deceased father is portrayed as also being affiliated with violence. Miguel recollects his father with near disdain. As a high ranking military man, Miguel’s father demonstrated no remorse for

his involvement in the highly unjustified, C.I.A assisted guerilla warfare against socialist leaning, democratically elected, government parties in Central and South America. Miguel names these the “Dirty Wars of Latin America” (32). Furthermore, Miguel’s father failed to show any emotions toward his family, and Miguel spent his childhood trying to do “everything [he] could to get [his] father’s attention” (32). Miguel’s father, then, embodies both the violent and emotionally distant male archetypes of the canon.

Though Castillo’s works certainly include characters that embody the *machismo* archetypes common to other works in the canon, not all her male characters are portrayed in such a one dimensional light. A shallow reading of these texts, and of the male characters held therein, however, has led some critics to conclude that Castillo portrays *all* her male characters in a negative way. In discussing the representation of males in *So Far*, Silvio Sirias and Richard McGarry assert that “the men represent patriarchy’s systematic domination of women” and that “the male characters in *So Far From God* are either powerless beings, completely lacking in fortitude, or zealots, as in the case of Francisco el Penitente, who will go to any length to protect male dominance in our society” (91). Carmela Delia Lanza’s “Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God*,” argues that the males in this novel are motivated by “desire to own a woman at any cost” which she defines as their evocation of *machismo* behavior (74). Not without her own stark criticisms of patriarchal society and the *machismo* behavior that pervades it, Castillo nonetheless represents *certain* male characters in an atypical fashion, prompting readers to peer into male subconscious worlds. In *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo’s works demonstrate male subjectivity, creating empathetic bonds between her male characters and her readers. By developing detailed backstories for her male characters, allowing her male characters to communicate directly with the reader through their own narrative voice or

that of an omniscient narrator, and by providing epiphanic moments of change for her male characters, Castillo writes outside of the subject/object framework, continuing the project of dismantling essentialist notions of gender. Furthermore, by illustrating novel representations of male/female relationships, Castillo offers visions for an establishment of new gender dynamics within the Chicana/o community. While all of the men in her novels are fallible, with their own unique struggles and weaknesses, the dynamic quality of their experiences and personalities allows them to defy the machismo stereotypes typically seen within the Chicana canon.

In *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo realistically crafts her main characters, endowing them with a variety of both positive and negative traits. Although the characters Domingo from *So Far* and Abuelo Milton from *Guardians* are given a few not-so-pleasant attributes, the ample background information provided for these characters allows readers to better understand their motivations and strengths in ways that resist essentialist labels. In *So Far*, Domingo's character might seem, at first, to be the epitome of the unfeeling, emotionally distant male. Because he has spent twenty years away from his family returning only to spend most of his time watching television in his chair, it is easy upon initial examination to assume that Domingo's presence in the novel simply serves to portray the emotionally detached male archetype. Though his considerable gambling addiction creates rifts within his relationships, insight into Domingo's past reveals the sincerity with which he cares for his family. The addition of Domingo's background adds palpable emotion to his character. Recalling the beginnings of his and Sofi's relationship, Domingo reminisces that in those days, "he looked forward to every sunset with Sofia, his Sofi" (110). When he and Sofi were young, he was always trying to make her smile. As a self-proclaimed actor, he would whisper to Sofi the infamous line "Frankly, my dear," but here, he would always stop short because "he did not curse in her presence" (104). What's more,

“he also did magic tricks for her, making a coin appear from behind her ear, a bouquet of paper roses for her from his sleeve, a real dove from inside his jacket” (105). Domingo’s genuine efforts to make Sofi happy in their youth are apparent as Sofi recalls that after the day she met Domingo, “only when she was with him was she able to smile” (105). Despite being ridiculed and rejected by Sofi’s family, Domingo courted her for three years while she was living at home. This sort of dedication was matched in his years away as, throughout his absence, he remained loyal to his wife. Infuriated by any rumors that suggested he had left Sofi for another woman, Domingo insisted “he was many things, but a bigamist, nunca” (23).

Towards the end of the novel, the reader finally discovers the real reason why Domingo had left his family for so long. Though Sofi was called La Abandonada by her neighbors, and had always thought of herself as an abandoned woman, it suddenly pops into her head that she had told Domingo to leave. After he had gambled away a large amount of their estate, Sofi had demanded, “Go, hombre, before you leave us all out on the street!” (214). In order to refrain from causing further financial harm to his family, Domingo left without a complaint. Little is known regarding his whereabouts over this twenty year absence, but as La Loca explains, “I been to hell. You never forget that smell. And my dad... he was there too.... This dad, out there, sitting watching T.V., he was in hell a long time. He’s like an onion, we will never know all of him—but he ain’t afraid no more” (23). Though Domingo slips back into gambling in his older years, when he was sent away from his family and home, he refused to return until he had “a recovery no less incredible than that of his two daughters who had undergone near death experiences” (40). Though his gambling certainly creates an unfortunate divide between himself and his family, Domingo’s back story reveals that he too, has suffered greatly. The nature of addiction is ugly, and manages to wrest from Domingo much of what he holds dear in life.

Nevertheless, in spite of his downfalls, the narrator demonstrates that over the years, he has encompassed charm, concern, and a deep love for Sofi and the other women of his household.

As it did for Domingo, detailed backstory of the characters in *Guardians* allows Abuelo Milton to be recognized for his positive attributes after a less-than-favorable first impression. When Milton is first introduced, he is frisky and flirtatious with Regina, a woman much younger than he is and clearly undesiring of his advances. Furthermore, he confesses, though with remorse, that he was an adulterer in his younger years: “I wasn’t a greedy man and never did nothing illegal . . . but I was never no santo. I did have an eye for the pretty ladies. . . . My poor wife. She knew it, too. But back then, it was expected of a man to have, well, you know, a life outside his home” (74). Though not without faults, however, Abuelo Milton’s backstory deftly demonstrates his lifelong dedication to assisting those less fortunate than he. As a young boy, Abuelo Milton discovered a clever way to earn money during a devastating economic climate—he ran errands for the women in nearby brothels. Rather than keep this money for himself, however, he gave all of it to his mother to help with family expenses. Whenever he was offered a peek inside the brothels instead of money, Milton remembers “I’d always say no, I want my pay first. Because I would hand it all over to mi jefita to help out” (71).

When Milton was a little older and was sent to fight in the Second World War, he demonstrated bravery not through combat but by pointing out the hypocrisy of those who saw the U.S. as having an infallible reputation regarding human equality. He recalls, “When I went to fight in Germany I’d tell people, Here los Anglos are fighting the Nazis. Over there, where I live, they treat us Mexicans as if they were the Nazis” (72). When his superior officer confronted him, Abuelo Milton refused to desist, stood up for those without a voice, and said “right this very minute while I am here fighting for you to go back and have a good life, the United States is



importing braceros to do the dirty work for me until I return” (72). Though his conduct resulted in a dishonorable discharge from the military, Milton emphasizes that he wasn’t capable of silently watching injustice in order to save his own skin, his own career. He tells Regina,

When I got back from the war with a dishonorable-mention discharge—not that I was proud of it, pero what could I do about it? . . . There were millions of braceros . . .

Haciendo de todo . . . That wasn’t the first guest worker program they set up here to get cheaper labor. Los obreros signed away all their rights. They didn’t even know what they were signing since everything was in English. And who was going to explain nothing to them, anyway? Desgraciada gente. They couldn’t even go back if they wanted to unless it was an emergency and only with permission from the growers who hired them. They were promised all kinds of things, too. They thought they’d get pensions. They got nothing, señorita, just a big kick in the trasero back to México when they weren’t needed no more. Where would this país be without the labor of the obrero? (72-73)

By speaking on behalf of these marginalized peoples during the second World War, Abuelo Milton demonstrated selflessness and emotional concern for the well-being of others.

Examples in Abuelo Milton’s past of his affection for, and dedication to, those in need is only further demonstrated by the role he took in helping to raise his grandson Miguel. Abuelo Milton was a consistent support for Miguel, filling the role left behind by his father. Recalling Miguel’s childhood, Milton states, “I went to every one of his games, too. His father was so busy with his military career and all. Who else was there for him, if not me, his grandpa?” (69)

Though, upon initial introduction, Milton comes across as a womanizing old man, Castillo’s extensive exposition of Milton’s background demonstrates that he is much more than a stand-in for a stereotype. Possessing numerous admirable qualities, including some often associated with

femininity, like dedication, compassion and the propensity to nurture others, Milton's character is sympathetic and beautifully relatable.

In addition to providing detailed backstories, Castillo facilitates an anti-essentialist reading of her prominent male characters by creating direct communication between these characters and the reader. This is possible because, unlike most Chicana novels, these novels are narrated from the perspective of multiple characters rather than from the perspective of a single female protagonist. In *So Far*, the narrator is omniscient, able to disclose the thoughts and actions of a multitude of characters. In *Guardians*, each of the four main characters (Regina, Gabo, Miguel, and Milton) take turns narrating the story. Through the use of an omniscient narrator or the narration of the characters themselves, male characters are able to iterate thoughts, feelings, motives and perspectives that would go undocumented in the tradition of the canon. As many of the females in these two novels acknowledge, the men in their lives largely suffer "like so many hispanos, nuevo mexicanos... from the inability to open [their] heart[s]" (*So Far* 14). And though the male characters struggle to vocalize their emotions, Castillo's narrative style brings to light some of their most intimate feelings.

In *So Far*, Domingo is mostly seen by his family members dawdling around the house or watching T.V. If the female characters were solely responsible for the narrative of the text, readers would have very limited exposure to Domingo's activities and emotions. The narrator's omniscient presence and interest in Domingo's life, however, provides the reader with a holistic portrayal of his thoughts including his fears, joys, and pains. In short, Domingo is able to express his subjective self. While the rest of the family communicates to one another about the ways in which they spend their time, Domingo often moves about in silence. Yet as he does so, he reflects upon the admirable strengths of his wife and daughters, considering the women of his

household to be “wondrous creatures” (118). He remains in awe of the women his daughters have become. When he goes to the local cantina, or converses with his compadres after church, he demonstrates a healthy sense of humor as he entertains their wild stories about his adventures away. Knowing that these were years of a living hell for Domingo, as La Loca informed us, his attitude seems all the more jovial. At times, however, his experiences at the cantina turn heated. Whenever Domingo overhears talk of his daughter Caridad’s vicious rape and brutalization, he becomes infuriated by the heartlessness of some. The narrator explains “he had defended her honor more than once in Valencia County bars when it was suggested that she had for all intents and purposes ‘asked for it’ when she was attacked” (65). Domingo finds the callousness of these neighbors to be unforgivable.

Domingo’s enmity is directed not just at his neighbors, but continues to be directed at the individuals and institutions that provide insufficient care for the safety of his daughters. He remains skeptical of the local police in Tome who, in his opinion, “had done next to nothing to find his daughter’s attacker or attackers when she was left for dead by the road” (63). When Caridad suddenly goes missing one day, rather than rely on the help of the police, Domingo spends weeks gathering search teams and combing the countryside. He demonstrates similar concern when Esperanza gets a journalist job in Saudi Arabia. Domingo is crushed by the news of his daughter’s departure, and the omniscient narrator is able to portray his distress: “When he went back home, he was happy to find [all his daughters] there, pretty much minding their own private lives. So what kind of trick of fate was this now to send his only college-educated civilian daughter off to war?” Worriedly, he asks Esperanza, “Well, they don’t send reporters out to where there’s fighting or real danger or nothing, do they, honey? . . . How come they don’t send someone with more experience, like La Diana Sawyer....!” After Esperanza goes missing,

Domingo and Sofi together write letters, make phone calls, and even travel three times to Washington D.C. in attempts to get information on the whereabouts and well-being of their missing daughter. On one occasion, Domingo concludes that their invitation to meet with a senator was only an attempt to get “some good publicity” (66). With each trip, the couple “returned more frustrated and sadder than when they left” (142).

Domingo’s grief builds as the novel progresses. After the deaths of his daughters Caridad and la Loca, he goes into a silent retreat, processing his pain by creating memorials for his lost children. For Caridad, he transmutes his pain into physical sacrifice as he works by hand to finish building her the home he had started to construct for her before her passing. For La Loca, Domingo builds a shrine, one that becomes utilized by the people of Tome who uplift her as their local saint. As each of his daughters dies, we learn that Domingo’s emotional grief becomes tangible as “losing the girls one after the next worked itself into his joints” (198). Ultimately, the narrator informs us that Domingo returns to his addiction, either spending his time gambling or “just sitting there all demoralized” (216). While Domingo doesn’t embody the same fortitude seen in his wife Sofi, his moral defeat evokes empathy as he suffers the loss of child after child. In the traditional storytelling of the canon, the depth of Domingo’s emotions would go unseen from the vantage point of other female characters and therefore, would not be presented to the readers. Castillo’s narrative strategies, therefore, produce a significantly unique connection between male experience, male subjectivity, and reader perception.

Likewise, in *So Far*, Castillo allows the male characters Miguel, Gabo, and Milton, the opportunities to narrate their own experiences, offering perspectives that are, at times, unseen or unknown by female characters. For example, when Miguel is first introduced, rumors of his active dating life abound at the high school where he teaches. Regina calls him a Casanova, and

claims that he had “gone out with every single woman” who’s worked at the school (39). What’s worse, Regina is fairly confident that Miguel is married. From an outside perspective, Miguel seems to behave just like the males at the MECHA meetings for *El Movimiento*—politically active men who fought for equality, yet failed to see how their womanizing attitudes participated in oppressive power dynamics. Miguel’s ability to narrate his own experiences, however, gives a very different account of the nature of his behavior. Immediately, Miguel is able to ameliorate his image to the reader as he describes the nature of his relationship with his *ex*-wife, Crucita:

Crucita and me split up last year—that’s when I moved into the trailer. Our kids stay with her. But I’m right across the street from my old house, where they still live . . . Jesus is in her life. Jesus and the evangelical minister she got involved with when we were still together. Crucita and I—still try to do things with our kids. “It’s all about maintaining family values,” she says. “Whatever you say, hon,” I’ll respond, to avoid the obvious contradiction in statements like that. (33)

Through Miguel’s ability to explain his family dynamics, we discover that it was only after filing for divorce that he begins dating, dates which he describes as largely platonic. What’s more, he remains dedicated to his children and kind to his ex-wife, regardless of the pain she caused their family. The introduction of Miguel’s narrative voice illustrates to the reader the ease with which one can formulate stereotypes and the necessity of accommodating subjective perspectives in order to avoid making oversimplified assumptions.

Miguel’s narration also allows him to explain the ways in which he cognitively attempts to show his emotions or let other people understand his intentions. The consequences of his upbringing and cultural influences are not lost on Miguel, and he continually grapples to understand his own failures within his relationships. By vocalizing his ongoing effort to unlearn

the “hard-ass cultural baggage crap” (206) that his father attempted to instill in him, Miguel demonstrates that the grip of patriarchal society has negative effects on everyone, including men. Looking back on his years with his ex-wife, Crucita, Miguel recalls a conversation in which she said, “You’re like so many men... you guys don’t let yourself feel your emotions” (84). Miguel confesses, “She was right but I didn’t know it then. I was out of touch with my feelings. I mean, I knew I loved her and the kids, I knew I wanted to look out for them as best I could. I just didn’t know how to show I felt it” (84). Though Miguel at times perpetuates machismo behavior, he too suffers from its consequences. Rather than being defined by the ways in which his behavior may imitate machismo culture, Miguel’s internal drive to better understand his own shortcomings is more central to the narrative.

Castillo’s dedication to challenging conclusive, essentialist ideas of male identity is further illustrated as she allows many of her male characters to experience epiphanic moments of personal growth throughout her novels. After years of being home, Domingo finally works up the humility to apologize to Sofi (112). In addition, when Sofi and the rest of the town of Tome are busy working on the sheep collective, Domingo moves into the small house he builds for Caridad. As he considers his possibilities and how he might demonstrate his worth to the family, it is evident that he has developed a more respectful and mature admiration for his wife. He concludes that he would work on finishing the house by hand and then when it “would be done and having shown his true mettle, Domingo would *ask* her this time—not Silly Sofi, but la Mayor Sofia of Tome—if he could come back home” (131). As critic Mayumi Toyosato claims, “Domingo starts to have a little sense of responsibility toward his family” (307). Domingo’s gambling addiction complicates his ability to ultimately become the supportive husband that Sofi deserves. In spite of this, his ability to learn from his previous mistakes and to correct his

behavior upon his second return home demonstrates that though he fails in many ways, he is capable of having kind intentions.

Several characters in *Guardians* also undergo progressive change and growth throughout the novel. Father Juan Bosco is an excellent example. As the local priest, Juan Bosco is often critical of Regina's refusal to attend mass. He is very enthusiastic, then, when her nephew Gabo, becomes involved at the church. Gabo, whose mother is deceased and whose father has gone missing, devotes his energies into his school work, his job, and his religious studies to distract himself from his perpetual fear that his father may be dead. In his free time, Gabo spends his days with the local priest, Juan Bosco, and leans on this representative of the Church for emotional support. After Father Juan Bosco falls in love with a young patron of the Church, however, the priest finds himself in a crisis of conflicting desires and expectations. Without explanation or a word of farewell, Juan Bosco attempts to acquit himself of his troubles and obligations. Abandoning his church and his young apprentice, Gabo, who desperately needed his care and support, the priest takes off to Rome. Demonstrating the impact of the Juan Bosco's selfishness, Gabo calls the priest's departure a "desertion" (161). One day, unexpectedly, Juan Bosco makes a surprising return to Cabuche and arrives at Regina's house to inform her and Gabo of his resumed duties at the church. While there, he seeks forgiveness from both Gabo and Regina. Regina, impressed by his changed demeanor, asserts that "humility was new for the priest" (170). He claims to have reflected a great deal during his travels and proposes, "if you cannot have me as your spiritual advisor, perhaps you will allow me to be your friend" (172). It seems as though Juan Bosco has finally taken to heart his commitment of active dedication to members of his congregation in a way he never had before. As Juan Bosco becomes an active participant in the search for Gabo's father, he employs a new understanding of "priestly"

behavior; he does whatever he can to demonstrate his love and compassion for Gabo. When Juan Bosco, Gabo, and Miguel try to get information from the gangbanger Jesse, Miguel informs the reader:

It was Juan Bosco who reached in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He took out two crisp one-hundred-dollar bills...the priest pulled off his watch. “Mira,” he said... “I got this in Italy. It’s solid gold... Just take the money and the watch and tell us where your brother is”... That was the watch Gabe had bought him as a souvenir from the Mercado in J-Town. He had told us it didn’t even run anymore. (197)

Even though it requires giving up his own money to a gang member and lying about the value of the watch, the priest helps Gabo, all the while demonstrating a better understanding of love and self-sacrifice. As Juan Bosco attempts to better himself and the lives of those around him, Castillo illustrates the possibility for the reversal and removal of the effects of machismo behavior.

Castillo’s representations of male characters allow the reader to gain close proximity with male subjectivity and, at times, elicits the reader’s sympathy by demonstrating the negative consequences of machismo culture on the male psyche as well as on the female’s. For some, these representations may appear to compromise the canon’s dedication to resistance against the machismo male. In a canon that has notably created “woman-centered spaces” (Anna Marie Sandoval 8), it is highly uncommon for a reader to be privy to male consciousness, and some believe that this should not change.<sup>25</sup> Cherríe Moraga, who is lauded as being “among the best

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<sup>25</sup> In her essay “Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor,” Emma Pérez “insists on imposing boundaries between herself and those who hold sociosexual power as a form of survival” (Rebolledo and Rivero 26), thus describing why some choose to distance themselves from sympathetic representations of males as seen in Castillo’s work.



known of Chicana feminist theorists” (Madsen 12), warns against the inclusion of males within the literary canon in *A Chicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings from 2000-2010*, and describes her theoretical position which aims to create a third-world women-of-color consciousness and subsequent political movement;<sup>26</sup> one that is constructed without the influence of peoples outside these categorical descriptions. Therefore, until the full actualization of this women-of-color movement takes place, she believes vocalizations of male perspectives in the female space of Chicana literature to be counterproductive. Commenting on her refusal to participate in the anthology *This Bridge We Call Home*, Moraga indicates that this decision was made when she learned the anthology was to include works by males and white women. In an entry from 2009, she writes, “from my perspective, to be ‘inclusive’ of (even) queer men and white women, at this stage of a U.S. feminism of color, would be to suggest that our movement had developed beyond the need for an autonomous dialogue *entrenos*” (123).<sup>27</sup> Though Moraga argues that the development of a third-world women-of-color dialogue must not include “men or white women” she states that this politic arrives from the need to create a safe space rather than from the desire to establish exclusionary practices (123).<sup>28</sup> Regardless of intention, however, Moraga’s theoretical activism re-invokes the dichotomy of us vs. them, while also implying the essentialist notion that there could be such a thing as a singular women-of-color point of view—a point of view all women of color may tap into that is uniquely their own because of the combination of their skin color and gender. Though Moraga intends to create change for the

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<sup>26</sup> “Moraga envisions a women’s movement” (Mohanty, Torres, and Russo 282).

<sup>27</sup> She goes on to state, “this was not Gloria’s politic, it was (and is) mine” (*Xicana Codex* 123).

<sup>28</sup> Moraga believes that there has existed a methodology of “deference to Chicano men and traditional family structures” (Mohanty, Torres, and Russo 282). In contention with this trend, she considers the only way to create change is to remove oneself from these aforementioned groups. Although she believes this separation from males and whites must be temporary, she does not indicate when or how one might determine that a third-world women-of-color consciousness has developed enough so that cross-gender dialogue may begin.

betterment of the oppressed, her desire for an autonomous women-of-color activism looks too familiar, too much like the very essentialism that the Chicana canon seeks to avoid, as it seems to suggest that there may be such a thing as an “authentic-woman-of-color.”

In “Postmodern Blackness,” African American theorist bell hooks warns against the usage of dualistic and essentialist thinking, even when utilized for reformatory purposes:

We must engage decolonization as a critical practice if we are to have meaningful chances of survival even as we must simultaneously cope with the loss of political grounding which made radical activism more possible. I am thinking here about the postmodernist critique of essentialism as it pertains to the construction of “identity” as one example. . . . The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition. (2480-1)

Thus, bell hooks argues that even if postmodernist activism requires an approach with limited political grounding, it is the only way to ensure that an epistemological change occurs, a change that moves away from dichotomies, moves away from the binaries of oppressor/oppressed, dominant/subordinate, white people/people of color, male/female, etc. Hooks warns against the habit of essentializing, even when it comes from within an oppressed group for the purpose of creating solidarity. True solidarity, she argues, stems from shared human emotive experience. In alignment with hooks’ views, Audre Lorde’s essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle

the Master's House," warns emphatically against employing binaries or essentialism as means to quell the excess of patriarchal power. "Only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" she argues "when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy" (94). The practice of essentialism, even that which is employed to outline a political identity in opposition to the hegemonic norm, is considered to be an insufficient, narrow-minded, and even dangerous practice by these theorists.

Aída Hurtado's "*Sitios y lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms*" reminds readers that the very foundation for, and strength of, Chicana feminism is its ability to work with various movements and people groups:

Chicana feminisms are informed by their participation in more than one political movement, which has benefitted their scholarship and artistic production by avoiding a false homogeneity in voicing their condition as women, as lesbians, as members of ethnic/racial groups, and as predominantly members of the working class. . . . Their disruptive voices have been raised within the context of collaboration and political coalition with various progressive movements, such as Third World feminisms, white feminisms, the Chicano movement, socialist/Marxist movements, and revolutionary movements primarily in Latin American and the Caribbean. (135)

As Hurtado points out, understanding the benefits of collective interaction, despite differences, can lead to positive and powerful insights. In *Making Face/Making Soul*, Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes the importance of solidarity in the work to disassemble essentialist, dualist thinking:

The work of mestiza consciousness is to ... show in the flesh and through the images [of one's] work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates

in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (379)

Anzaldúa's aforementioned theory of *nos/otras* demonstrates the potential for transformation so long as one avoids emphasizing difference and resorting to isolation. With this theory, she determines that it is precisely through tolerance for conflicting perspectives that one dismantles essentialism and achieves the conditions necessary to develop non-binary thinking. It is evident, then, that the inclusion of male subjectivity in Castillo's texts does not undermine the underlying goal of Chicana activism—to discover and promote non-binary epistemologies that will eradicate oppression. While peripheral characters demonstrate the extreme and serious consequences of *machismo* behavior and patriarchal society, by creating sympathetic male characters, Castillo simultaneously highlights cross-gender similarities and grounds her challenge to essentialism in the promise of positive and healthy cross-gender relationships. Although Castillo takes a very rare approach in her narratives by including a subjective insight into male experience, her work forwards the Chicana feminist agenda by demonstrating gender in non-essentialist ways.

### CHAPTER III

#### BRIDGING ACROSS POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL DIVIDES: DRAWING FEMINIZED AND RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS TOGETHER THROUGH CONOCIMIENTO

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa insists, “lumping the males who deviate from the norm with man, the oppressor, is a gross injustice” (106), a point which Castillo highlights as she urges her readers to include male perspectives in the effort to create societal/cultural change. In Chicana activism, the theoretical perspective that “the personal is political” encourages the understanding that while there are *people* who enact oppression, the real battle is with culture itself, with immaterial, illusory paradigms. Thus, while the previous chapter outlined ways in which males may choose to interact with or resist *machismo*, Chicanas/os must work to identify all contributors to the patriarchal ideals of the culture at large. Women, as well as men, can be complicit in participating in the patriarchal order as they obediently abide by the status quo, accepting without question the gender-specific roles that society admits them to have, and encouraging others to do so along with them.

Having internalized culturally established imperatives regarding possible or appropriate female behavior and obligations, many women remain unaware of the fact that the very belief in compulsory gender roles contributes to female subjugation. Madsen insists that all who enforce traditional gender roles within Chicano communities are complicit in advancing “lies that are told to children, especially girl children, in order to regulate their desires, ambitions, and aspirations” (114). From a feminist perspective, Chicana activists demonstrate that the misogyny embedded in their culture is, in fact, a tool, specifically designed to keep women from finding autonomy or sociopolitical success. As more and more Chicana authors have proved capable of securing economic independence, they have documented the doubt they endured not just from

men, but from all within their communities. Consequently, they have demonstrated that patriarchal paradigms are deeply woven into the fabric of Chicana/o culture at large. In order to challenge the division of power along gender lines, Chicana authors and activists in the late 1970s began to scrutinize cultural assumptions regarding the degree to which gender contributes to one's mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities. Theorists and literary protagonists alike examine Chicana/o culture in an effort to identify the sources of repressive ideologies, asking “‘Who am I? How did I become the person that I am? What are my historical and cultural antecedents, my racial characteristics, and how do these factors define my place in society?’” (Rebolledo and Rivero 23). As these questions suggest, the Chicana genre seeks to identify not simply the *manifestations* of patriarchal society, but to discover the very origins, the myths and the institutions, that have *created* the Chicana/o ideological framework.

In its fierce dedication to demanding female equality, Chicana theory has encouraged women to redefine their own relationship with societal and cultural institutions, seeking self-definition free from oppressive thought and traditions. Rebolledo and Rivero describe self-definition as it manifests in Chicana literature:

Chicanas must give birth to themselves, in an epiphany of cultural and existential feeling. . . . They alone are responsible for identity, they will bring themselves into the world, regardless of the bitter lessons of history. Chicanas emerge from their own roots, from their own blood. . . . (78)

As a project of developing consciousness, part of the journey Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*, self-definition requires much more than the ability to ascribe a title to one's self, to place one's self into a particular identity category. Rather, it is a process that seeks awareness regarding how one is shaped by society, and asks which societal conventions, behaviors, and mindsets are no longer

useful to the individual. As Madsen states, "self-definition offers an alternative to the stereotypes prescribed by a racist and sexist culture; the freedom of self-definition extends well beyond the freedom to name... and enables the poet to engage in actions and behaviors that are otherwise prohibited" (201). In addition to ridding one's life of oppressive or unhelpful elements, Madsen asserts that expansive opportunities and lifestyles are made available through this process of self-definition.

The examination of societal structures in search of potential contributors to oppression is a predominant theme in the literature of both male and female Mexican-American authors. Throughout Chicana/o literature, protagonists examine cultural and political systems, policies, institutions, and agencies in order to identify contributors to the racial, social, economic, and political oppression of the Mexic-Amerindian people. The literature of *El Movimiento*—literature previously demonstrated as being mostly composed of works by male authors—advocated for widespread cultural resistance, thus it sought to identify contributors to the socio-economic and political oppression of Mexican-American communities as a whole. Much of this literature eviscerates programs and policies associated with U.S. socioeconomic and political systems including immigration policies, urban planning, foreign trade agreements, and, most importantly, the capitalist economic system. In Chicana literature, however, thematic emphasis on the experiences of the individual establishes a contextual space in which authors may identify institutions and organizations that contribute to psychic, emotional, intellectual, or other personal oppressions. As Rebolledo and Rivero describe, in Chicana literature, "[a]ll power relationships are questioned in a search for an understanding of how Chicanas came to be as they are and for a new way of being" (27).

In literature, Chicanas have directed extensive criticism toward the Catholic Church, finding this religious institution to be the main contributor to the establishment and normalization of misogynist paradigms in the Chicana/o community. Asserting that the Church and commonly-held Catholic beliefs are the main contributors to misogynist, patriarchal thought, Chicana activists from the 70s onward have condemned the Church for providing a religious pretext for the patriarchal cruelties of modern society. The feminist political agenda implicit in Chicana literature seeks to wrench away the Church's authority over the Chicana female by portraying protagonists who renounce or otherwise disregard the Catholic faith and by exhibiting Chicanas who embrace alternative spiritual beliefs. In *So Far* and *Guardians*, however, Castillo resists adopting this either/or position that suggests a Chicana may either be a politically conscious feminist or a Catholic, but not both. As the characters Sofi, Esperanza, Caridad, and La Loca in *So Far*, and Regina in *Guardians* become increasingly cognizant of feminist concerns, they discover ways to address these concerns without totally abandoning the faith of their communities. Thus, these feminized characters—characters who have become self-aware and who have developed politically feminist perspectives—pursue self-definition whilst retaining Catholic beliefs and practices, each to varying degrees. By presenting feminized, politically conscious characters who also associate with the Catholic faith, these novels provide distinctively new understandings of the similarities between politicized Chicanas and their traditional families and communities whilst transferring pressure to change away from the individual and towards the institution itself.

The works of many Chicana authors to date have contributed sound accusations against the Catholic Church and its societal influence. As Chicana activists and authors of the 70s and 80s probed Catholic teachings and fables, they exposed many ways in which the Church has



promoted misogynistic worldviews. With eyes keen to identify the possible origins of Chicana/o gender disparity, Chicanas have ventured to reexamine female biblical figures and the traditional interpretations of their behavior. They demonstrated that biblical stories, which are all authored by males, repeatedly relate tales in which a female is punished simply for taking steps toward self-improvement. Through the account of Eve, Chicanas illustrate that the female has served as a scapegoat for the degradation of society, and argue that the Catholic human origin story sets precedence for the practice of female subjugation within society. Anzaldúa illustrates the Church's demonization of the female in her recapitulation of the myth of Eve:

Throughout millennia those seeking alternative forms of knowledge have been demonized. In the pursuit of knowledge, including carnal knowledge (symbolized by the serpent), some female origin figures 'disobeyed.' . . . [F]emales are expelled from "paradise" for eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and for taking individual agency. Their "original sin" precipitates the myth of the fall of humankind, for which women have been blamed and punished. (*This Bridge We Call Home* 543)

It is not evil, violence, or greed that Eve pursues and is subsequently punished for. Rather, she is condemned merely for her pursuit of self-awareness and her thirst for knowledge. Anzaldúa further explains that in the Church, female sin is portrayed as "[t]he passion to know, to deepen awareness, to perceive reality in a different way, to see and experience more of life—in short, the desire to expand consciousness—and the freedom to choose" (543). Chicana feminists, like Gloria Anzaldúa, invoke the story of Eve to underscore how the Church has contributed to a societal paradigm that discourages female critical thinking or dissidence, and even suggests that these behaviors merit punishment.

In addition to Eve—Catholicism’s first female, mother, seeker of knowledge—another important Catholic female figure, the Mother Mary, has garnered much attention by Chicana activists, authors, and artists. Mary, or more specifically, her manifestation as the brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe, presents an interesting case as her relationship with the Mexican people extends beyond religious purposes. According to legend, in December 1531, the Virgin appeared before an indigenous man named Juan Diego in the very spot where the Aztec goddess Tonantzin had been worshipped. Juan Diego, a poor indigenous man who had recently converted to Catholicism, spoke to the Virgin and returned to his town with an image of her painted on his leather cloak. Her appearance was considered by many to be a blessing upon the Mexican-Amerindian people. In addition, the apparition of Mary in the worship place of Tonantzin was interpreted as an awesome display of this Catholic mother figure’s power and her dominance over the indigenous deity (*Borderlands* 50-1). The Virgin was quickly elevated within the esteem of Mexican society as she came to represent the Mother-protector of the Mexican people. Highlighting Mary’s importance as a political symbol, Gail Perez explains that after her first encounter with Juan Diego, the virgin’s “apparition continued to grace indigenous revolts” (53) and her image was used as a sigil during battles for independence.

With its firm adoration for the mother Mary, Mexican Catholicism identifies the Virgin as righteousness in the flesh. The cult of Marianismo, or the veneration of Mary, encourages women to recognize the virgin as the model for holy behavior. As Rebolledo and Rivero assert, the Catholic religion with its emphasis on the personal intervention of the Virgin Mary and its cult of Marianismo (that is, to emulate the Virgin one should emulate her characteristics of faith, self-abnegation, motherhood, and purity), of course, heavily

influenced many Hispanic women who look to the intervention of the Virgin in their daily lives. (189)

In order to emulate this holy mythic persona, Chicanas are taught to value inaction and servility and to accept without question their condition in life. Through Marianismo, women are taught that their worth lies only in their identities as virgins or as chaste mothers, and as they are expected to cultivate characteristics that lead to powerlessness and self-denial. Not surprisingly, Chicana activists have drawn a connection between the cult of Marianismo, and the cultural prerogative of female subjugation. Ana Castillo argues in her theoretical work *Massacre of the Dreamers*, that “we have been forced into believing that we, as women, only existed to serve man under the guise of serving a Father God” (13). Deborah Madsen also affirms

the reason why women must be silent is part of a broader cultural imperative that women seek invisibility and a denial of their being. In this resides the fundamental misogyny of traditional Mexican society. The Church, the family, the culture, require that women be subservient to men. . . . Selflessness and humility define the “good” women; “bad” women, in contrast, are selfish and value their own selves, to which they give expression. (25)

Thus, it is made apparent within Chicana feminism that the very stereotypes and expectations which limit Chicana capabilities are honored within the Catholic Church.

In addition to advocating for female docility, the cult of Marianismo sets up an impossible standard for Chicana women as it condemns female sexuality and sexual activity yet emphasizes the importance of motherhood. Mary’s precedent establishes conflicting expectations of the Catholic female—how might one become a mother while still demonstrating chastity? The tension that this expectation raises is played out in the flesh, as Chicana women are taught that

their bodies will be responsible for their spiritual failures. Thus, the mere corporeality of Chicana existence predetermines the disgrace of the soul. The dualistic paradigms of the west, in conjunction with this overly critical stance against the female body, has led to a dichotic split within the Chicana psyche, the belief that one is either virgin or puta (whore), that there is no middle ground. Addressing the beliefs of Mexican Catholicism, with its extreme veneration of Mary, Castillo insists in *Massacre* that “the church... represents authority in [the Chicana’s] life, especially over her sexuality and reproductive ability” (48). To many women, the regulation of the female body by the Catholic Church threatens their wellbeing and safety as it vilifies and attempts to manipulate their corporeal existence.

In a poignant story entitled “Frederico y Elfiria,” author Carmen Tafolla deftly illustrates the extent to which Chicana/o culture demonizes, even refuses to acknowledge, female sexuality. The excerpt below demonstrates how this cultural perspective inhibits even a well-meaning husband from acknowledging his wife’s need for intimacy. After the birth of their first child, Frederico is stunned by Elfiria’s suggestion that they become sexually intimate again:

“Hace mucho tiempo. I’m healed now, tú sabes, down there. . . .” Frederico was touched, but, muy caballero, comforts, “That’s O.K. honey. I don’t need it. I can wait some more.” The dam burst, and Elfiria, tired and glad the baby was finally asleep, burst too. “But I need it! I can’t wait some more!” Frederico was stunned. “. . . But you hombre! I always thought you were . . .” he gulped and said it directo, “. . . a good girl.” “Ya para con estas tonterías! Of course I’m a good girl! I’m more than that! Soy una madre—the mother of our child y soy tu esposa—wife you know. Like married?” Frederico had never thought of it that way. He had always heard of pos, tú sabes—desas, bad girls, y también of course de good girls—but of someone being a good girl plus more? Maybe

that explained it. Maybe eso de ser mother and wife let her do these kinds of things plus be a good girl. He hadn't figured it out completely, pero Elfiria interrupted him and said, "¡Ya olvídate de esas cosas! Let's go to bed" And they did, and pos, tú sabes, a man can only do so much all by himself. (141-142)

Frederico's complete inability to understand his wife's advances reveals the extent to which the harsh distinctions between the good virgin and bad whore permeate the Chicana/o psyche.

In her historical study *Las Hermanas*, Lara Medina demonstrates that religious dissidence was common among many of the Chicanas/os who pursued academic vocations from the early 60s through the late 80s. For feminized Chicanas who had made connections between the Catholic faith and cultural misogyny, they realized that "the Catholic faith had for too long determined their subjugation in a patriarchal culture" (6). Yet feminism alone isn't the only theoretical, political factor that has contributed to the widespread disassociation from the church amongst educated Chicanas. For the Chicana lesbian, the Church represents not just subjugation, but a threat to her well-being as it declares her love, her intimate relationships a sin and gives ammunition to those who wish to harass her for her orientation. Moraga documents her own experience with Church sanctioned homophobia, as she recalls seeing billboards purchased by the Mormon Church exhorting, "'Marriage=1 man + 1 woman.'" Moraga's response is her own slogan: "get your f-ing Church out of my State" (182).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, from a cultural and ethnic perspective, many Chicanas/os who have studied the colonial history of the Americas have discovered multiple ways in which the Church has repressed indigenous peoples. Medina states,

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<sup>29</sup> Moraga extends her critique of the Church in this passage, saying, "If Christians really want to preserve the 'holy family,' then they should dig into those deep Mormon pockets, take their protest signs, and go down to their local California penitentiary and first demand the release of all the mothers and fathers held captive there, and then figure out how to get them some viable employment. Finally, they need to quit using the colonized to do the bidding for the colonizer" (*Xicana Codex* 182).

“As Chicano/as critiqued their history shaped by colonizing powers intertwined with Christian missionaries, many saw rejecting Catholicism as an essential element for self-determination” (6). Many culturally concerned Chicanas/os have found it no longer possible to associate with this institution which has so clearly contributed to the sociopolitical repression of indigenous peoples.

Finally, the ideological Marxist, socialist leanings of *El Movimiento* has also led politicized Chicanas/os to reject Catholicism. Medina explains that “Marxist influence . . . stressed ‘religion as an opiate of the masses,’ and further alienated many Chicanos from religion in any form” (6-7). Moraga further describes the movement’s critical distrust of the Catholic Church: “El Movimiento as it was influenced by Marxist-oriented ideology (which was overshadowed admittedly by nationalism) focused on our economic and class struggles as a people. . . . [T]hat socialist influence rightly understood the connections between institutionalized religion with a surplus-based society and therefore, rejected the Church” (Moraga 12).<sup>30</sup> The combined criticisms lodged against the Church by Chicana feminism, the queer community, historically concerned Chicanas/os, and the Marxist sectors of *El Movimiento*, developed a clear divergence between the religious and spiritual associations (or lack thereof) of the Chicana/o academic community and the religious affiliation to the Catholic Church of the Chicana/o community at large.

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<sup>30</sup> Attempts to distance the Chicana/o Movement from matters of religion have been so significant to many works that many scholars have come to expect all Chicana/o texts to be anti-religious or irreligious. As Medina notes in *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (2005): “Previous scholarship on the Chicano movement has virtually ignored the presence of religious leaders among its participants, particularly women religious [leaders]” (6).

In Chicana fiction, rejection of the Catholic Church is also apparent. The Church is removed as the nucleus of Chicana culture by presenting characters who are apathetic or indignant about the practice of Catholicism, or by completely avoiding topics of religion or spirituality altogether. In Viramontes' story "The Moths," the protagonist demonstrates resentment for the practice of Catholicism. She resists going to Church so often that her father repeatedly uses the threat of violence to motivate her to go. As her father represents another example of the authoritative machismo male and demands that his daughter upholds the practices of Catholicism, Viramontes highlights the ways in which patriarchal authorities and religion may work together to oppress females and maintain traditional power dynamics. Thus the Church becomes closely associated with forceful, patriarchal order:

That was one of Apá's biggest complaints. He would pound his hands on the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream that if I didn't go to Mass every Sunday to save my goddamn sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final. He would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism. Did he make himself clear? Then he strategically directed his anger at Amá for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving, and my older sisters would pull me aside and tell me if I didn't get to Mass right this minute, they were all going to kick the holy shit out of me. Why am I so selfish? Can't you see what it's doing to Amá, you idiot? So I would wash my feet and stuff them in my black Easter shoes that shone with Vaseline, grab a missal and veil, and wave goodbye to Amá. (8)

In Sandra Cisneros' story "Mericans," two children also express their dislike of Church as they wait outside for their "awful grandmother" (47), the only family member who continues to go to

Mass or to pray. As the young girl Micaela considers her aversion to Church, she wonders “why do Churches smell like the inside of an ear? . . . And why does holy water smell of tears? The awful grandmother makes me kneel and fold my hands” (47). Both “Moths” and “Mericans” explore a consideration of Catholicism as an amalgamation of empty, lifeless traditions that provide no spiritual value to the characters’ lives. While these young protagonists are agitated by the deadening, stifling qualities of the Church, others portray the Church as active—that is, as an agent—actively involved in damaging the psyche of the Chicana/o community. In her own memoir, Moraga thinks back to the days in which she was required to participate in Catholic rituals as a young girl and recalls that “[t]he Catholic Church’s rituals of confession and penance threatened to drown me in an ocean of torment” (*A Xicana Codex* 195). As Chicana narratives explore the subject of religion, the Catholic Church is rarely seen to offer positive spiritual experiences.

While many activists and authors alike endeavor to reject the Catholic institution and its inherent misogyny, some Chicanas are not willing to reject religion outright. Thus, while some have adopted atheistic worldviews, others pursue spiritual practices that remain outside of the Catholic Church. Castillo asserts, “Some radical activistas in addition to ideologically rejecting the Church, moved toward indigenismo and began to practice Native American and Mexic Amerindian ways” (90).<sup>31</sup> As the Chicana/o activism of the 60s, 70s, and 80s rediscovered and popularized forgotten traditions and practices of ancestral indigenous peoples, they discovered that their indigenous antecedents were peoples with rich religious histories and belief systems.

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<sup>31</sup> Medina also concludes, “For many activists, a fervent Mesoamerican spirituality replaced the European religion of their parents...interrelated factors combined with the absence, or at times negative presence, of the Catholic Church in Chicano struggles convinced the majority of a generation of activists that the Catholic Church and its representatives had little to offer” (6-7).



As interest in indigenous religions, primarily those of the Aztecs, grew within the Chicana/o community, historians and anthropologists pieced together the legends of many indigenous gods and goddesses and discovered a great deal of information regarding the practices of indigenous peoples. Many Chicana/o literary narratives pay tribute to these legends and traditions within their texts.

Though it is unfortunate, the religions and societal customs of the native peoples and especially of the Aztecs did not resurface without blemish. Many Chicanas took issue with devotion to these spiritual practices, as indigenous religions were not exempt of patriarchal traditions and were replete with inaccurate assumptions regarding gender differences. And while some indigenous religions and cultures were less culpable for promoting oppressive gender norms than others, the majority of indigenous religions within Mexico had increasingly favored the male gender over time. Castillo explains, “By the sixteenth century, the imperialism of the Mexica Empire had evolved to the point where the primary role for woman was to serve male-ruled society . . . the Mexicas, while sophisticated with regard to the arts and sciences, were systematically subordinating the female gender” (*Massacre* 105-6). As the Aztec society increasingly valued male traits associated with strength and conquest, they began to favor male deities, relegating female goddesses to only a fraction of their original powers. For example, the goddess Coatlicue, mother creator, was once highly revered as both creator and destroyer by indigenous peoples:

Goddess of love and sin, she created life/devoured life, she was the symbol of ambivalence of all human life, personification of awesome natural forces, monster who devoured the sun at night/brought it to life in the morning, ageless, beginning and end,

threatening/beneficent, [she] represents birth *and* death. Coatlicue, therefore, represents all aspects of a dual nature and is a cyclical figure. (Rebolledo and Rivero 190)

Within the Aztec society, however, reverence of Coatlicue progressively subsided, along with recognition of her array of powers (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 49). According to legend, upon the discovery of Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City) by the Aztecs, an eagle, which symbolizes the male god of war Huitzilopochtli, was seen biting the head off of a snake, the symbol for Coatlicue (See Fig. 1).



Figure I: The Mexican Coat of Arms represents the scene that is said to have taken place upon the discovery of Tenochtitlan (Bandera de Mexico).

Interpretation of the destruction of Coatlicue's serpent by Huitzilopochtli's eagle determined that the superiority of the male was the divine order. Coatlicue eventually became known only for her capacity to destroy.<sup>32</sup> In her theoretical work, Castillo informs us that

by the time we get to the sixteenth century, the militant Mexica have transformed Coatlicue (another version of the Mother) into a ghastly, hostile deity. The death aspect of the dual power of Mother—fertility and death—had taken over. Around her neck a necklace of men's hearts and hands was symbolic of her insatiable thirst for human sacrifice. Let's keep in mind that that image of Coatlicue was created in the context of a war-oriented, conquest driven society, that of the Aztecs. (11)

Other indigenous female goddesses were similarly disempowered over time. In the same way that Eve was punished for her pursuit of knowledge, the indigenous goddess Xochiquetzal was eternally damned. Anzaldúa explains, "Xochiquetzal, a Mexican indigenous deity, ascends to the upper-world to seek knowledge from 'el árbol sagrado,' the tree of life, que florecía en Tamoanchan" and is "expelled from 'paradise'" (*Bridge We Call Home* 543).

Demonstrating the extent to which patriarchy has infiltrated all major religions, Castillo observes:

First, the mythology that has affected civilization in the last four to five thousand years was created out of the imaginations of men; second, its creation was dependent upon the needs of those men in power; and third, patriarchal mythology can be argued to have been based on a direct attack against woman as creatrix. (*Massacre* 114-5)

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<sup>32</sup> It is due to Coatlicue's relegation to woman-destroyer that she is often equated with the mythic murderess named La Llorona who is said to haunt waterways, wailing in search of the children she drowned.

Due to the consistent condemnation of women within religious origin stories, some Chicanas began to reconcile with the fact that they could look neither to the present nor to the past to retrieve religious ideologies free from oppressive teachings regarding gender. To the Chicanas who still desired a spiritual connection to some higher power, the inaccessibility of a non-patriarchal religious order has proved deeply problematic.

Accepting the assertion that past and present religions alike suffer from inadequate representations of female agency, Chicana literature has explored the mythmaking potential of autohistoria-teoria blending history, theory, myth, and fiction to rewrite religious ideologies and legends. Reformation of female myths has primarily derived inspiration from indigenous female women and goddesses. As Rebolledo and Rivero state, “in terms of an internal mythology, Chicanas have looked to their cultural heritage to find myths and archetypes that form a paradigm to their own lived experience and have consciously designed and re-designed myths and archetypes not to their liking” (24). For example, through historical accounts and feminist theory, Chicanas have argued that a patriarchal agenda, one that fears and envies the power within the feminine creatrix, is to blame for the interpretation of Coatlicue’s demise and have invoked new, feminized images of this deity. Myth and storytelling allow Chicanas to redefine Coatlicue, offering new representations of her that fully honor her extensive powers and sovereignty. Representing Coatlicue as the Mother God, some Chicanas also suggest that the Virgin of Guadalupe is not a manifestation of Mary, who was obedient to a male god, but that she is a manifestation of this indigenous all-powerful female.

While Chicana authors have utilized literature to introduce and integrate feminized, non-Catholic myths into the spiritual psyche of their families and communities, the greater Chicana/o community has held tight to their traditional Catholic beliefs. Thus, while Chicana literature

reveals contempt for, and skepticism of, the Catholic Church reflecting the positions of many academically and politically influenced Chicanas/os, it does not represent the religious and spiritual perspectives of the majority of the Chicana/o community. Castillo expresses the continued significance of Catholicism amongst Mexic-Amerindian peoples explaining that “Mexican culture and Mexican traditions exude Catholicism” (*Massacre* 90). The stark contrast between the portrayal of Catholicism in literature and the understanding of Catholicism by the greater Chicana/o community has led many to perceive the activism of politicized Chicanas/os as an attack against faith and tradition. The concerns regarding Catholicism that are brought forth by activists are overlooked by the majority of the Chicana/o community, a majority who opposes the proposition that they abandon their faith.

While many feminized, politicized Chicana authors have identified rejection of Catholicism with the reclamation of personal agency, it is evident that total abandonment of the Catholic Church is not an attractive option for the majority of their intended readers. Though the misogynistic, homophobic, and racist agendas promoted by the Church are serious causes for concern, Castillo explains that some activists have become reluctant to address issues of religious concern in fear of the likely negative reception of this unpopular agenda by fellow Chicanas/os. Though an individual may personally renounce Catholicism, she recognizes that to take her concerns public, “[t]o oppose the Church would mean causing conflict within her own family and community” (*Massacre* 89). Thus, while the Church may be partially or wholly responsible for certain injustices met by the Chicana/o community at large, and by Chicanas in particular, it is evident that the Chicana feminist agenda of total Catholic denunciation has kept many from joining their cause. In *Massacres*, Castillo states, “Although the Catholic Church as an institution cannot for a number of reasons guide us as Mexican/Amerindian women into the 21st century,

we cannot make a blanket dismissal of Catholicism either. Rejecting the intolerant structure of the church does not automatically obliterate its entrenchment in our culture" (59). As Chicana literature has largely paired criticism of the Catholic Church with narratives that strive to "obliterate" or renounce the Catholic Church, it is evident that new tactics are needed in order to appeal to the greater Chicana/o community and work to adequately address the Church's various intolerances.

Castillo's works respond to this need as *So Far* and *Guardians* offer unique portrayals of feminized consciousness formation and spiritual practice that unveil criticisms of the Catholic Church while simultaneously portraying ways in which Catholicism can contribute to individual and collective well-being. As the characters in these novels make critical assessments about traditional Catholicism and formulate their own political ideologies, they do so while maintaining various Catholic beliefs and practices. As each character develops her own spiritual practice in accordance to her process of female empowerment, these novels demonstrate the importance of recognizing spirituality as a process, not a product, and emphasize the unique qualities of each individual's path. Understanding the difference between spirituality and religion is an integral component to understanding the ways in which these characters are able to practice such Catholicism while maintaining feminist ideals. In Alexia Schemien's "Hybrid Spiritualities," she distinguishes spirituality as the practices and beliefs connecting an individual to that which generates confidence, courage, hope, peace of mind, contentedness and gratefulness for life, and aligns the individual with an ethical understanding of life's purpose. On the other hand, religion is posited as a doctrinal organization of beliefs, histories, and ethics that have been standardized and institutionalized by certain authorities to present a belief system that individuals may adopt as their own. Within religion, an individual is instructed on what actions

to perform in order to find the connections to confidence, courage, hope, purpose, etc. whereas spirituality requires that individuals discover practices that specifically appeal to them.

As the characters in these novels make critical assessments about traditional Catholicism, explore the association between suppressed femininity and the material world, and redefine feminine myths, they each develop unique spiritual practices largely formulated by their identification with the Catholic faith. Thus, rather than vilify Catholicism, Castillo's novels demonstrate the importance of recognizing spirituality as an individualized *process*, and emphasize the unique qualities of each individual's path. Using Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento*, I will demonstrate how Castillo's representation of spirituality demonstrates the work of a *nepantlera* as she constructs ideologies that bridge the traditional and the unconventional. In *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo demonstrates the importance of *conocimiento*, of truth seeking and spiritual awareness. As her characters pursue their own interpretations of what it means to be spiritual, they demonstrate the variety of ways in which one might find a connection with a greater purpose or higher power. While Castillo offers plentiful criticism of the Catholic Church in these novels to insist that "[s]pirituality and institutionalized religion are not the same thing" (*Massacre* 96), she does not denigrate faith in the Catholic God. Through the exposition of the failures of the Church, and the integration of feminine perspectives, Castillo demonstrates the importance of *conocimiento*, or awareness, to one's spiritual life, regardless of the deity or deities he or she observes. In this way, Castillo as *nepantlera* creates a bridge across the faith-based differences between Catholic and the politicized feminist/lesbian/Marxist/etc., demonstrating the possibility of creating healthy spiritual lifestyles, intolerant of oppression and accepting of difference within the Chicana/o community at large.

The first stage upon the path of *conocimiento* is called “*el arrebatado*” or “rupture” or even “*aja!*”: it is a moment in life when one is confronted with a force, an event, or an idea that thrusts one out of one’s “cultural trance” (546). This moment of awakening in which one is no longer able to accept the lies of society is portrayed in Chapter II in the moments of epiphanic clarity experienced by Domingo, Miguel, and Father Juan Bosco. In many cases, this awakening comes as a sudden response to a personal injustice—it occurs in the midst of violence, trauma, insult, and despair. It is the moment an abused wife realizes she doesn’t actually deserve the “punishments” hammered out on her body; the moment when the basketball team from the high school in *el barrio* realizes that only the predominantly white schools in their district have paid coaches, adequate equipment, and a score of alumni who have received sports scholarships; the moment when a third generation American of color is walking down the street and someone shouts “go back to your own country!” It is in moments like these that the rupture occurs, and one can no longer accept the interpretations and directives of others, especially those in positions of authority. Anzaldúa explains, “you’re aware of your vulnerability, wary of men, and no longer trust the universe” (“now let us shift” 545).

For Sofi, this occurs on the day her youngest daughter, La Loca, rose from the dead and flew to the rooftop of the church. It was not the resurrection of her daughter, who “sat up, just as sweetly as if she had woken from a nap,” that ruptured Sofi’s world view, for, with complete faith, she accepted her daughter’s return as an answer to prayer. Instead, it is Father Jerome who causes Sofi’s *arrebatado*. Critic Rebecca Olmedo asserts, “As the representative of the institutional church, the priest attempts to ascertain the source of power for the supernatural phenomena in an orthodox manner” (7). The orthodoxy of the Church designates Father Jerome, along with the other male leaders of the Church, as an intermediary between the heavenly realm and Church



followers. Thus, the priest takes it upon himself to question La Loca, asking, “Is this an act of God or of Satan...?” (23). Despite this man’s occupation as a spiritual authority, Sofi is “unable to tolerate [his] mere suggestion . . . that her daughter, her blessed, sweet baby, could by any means be the devil’s own” (23). Sofi rejects the order through which events are meant to be interpreted as she screams, “If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don’t you dare start this backward thinking against her; the devil doesn’t produce miracles! And *this* is a miracle, an answer to the prayers of a brokenhearted mother” (23). By insisting upon the fact that La Loca has come back as an answer to her prayers, Sofi no longer accepts Father Jerome’s absolute authority over spiritual affairs.

The life of La Loca, and the legend of Loca that is followed by her eventual death in her twenties, reinforces Sofi’s stance against Father Jerome’s assumption that he is entitled to intervene in all matters of spirituality. Rather than allow Father Jerome to become her spiritual instructor, La Loca insists, “*she* could tell Father Jerome a thing or two about the wishes of God” (221). And as the narrator confirms, Loca performs multiple miracles throughout her life, which demonstrate her strong connection to the hereafter. Despite her awesome miraculous displays, Father Jerome’s doubt in La Loca is made clear when he assumes a position of pity in regards to the girl and “finally dismissed Loca as a person who was really not responsible for her mind” (221). Other members of the clergy maintain similar conclusions. When the local bishop hears of Loca’s resurrection, he dismisses it as “an example of the ignorance of that community” (85). The clergymen’s move to denigrate the intelligence of the community, and specifically of La Loca, is further demonstrated through the renaming of the young girl after her resurrection, referring to her only as the “crazy one”—in fact, not a single person remembers her birth name. The attempt by the Church to disavow the girl’s resurrection and her spiritual force, however,

proves futile. As those who witnessed her flight were persuaded of her heavenly blessing and spread her story, she “earned the name around the Rio Abajo region and beyond, of La Loca Santa” (25). Many came from far away to show dedication to her, and though their interest in her waned over the years, as her death approaches, “a great wave of sadness, like a dry ocean tide, went over the whole region” (231). When she finally passes, she becomes known throughout central New Mexico as the Patron of all God’s creatures (232), and later, becomes recognized worldwide (though is never made official by the Pope) as simply, herself, La Loca Santa. As the people of Tome, and eventually millions throughout the world recognize the holiness of La Loca Santa, they substantiate Sofi’s refusal to allow the priest to dictate what is and is not divine. Furthermore, La Loca is able to define herself, outside of patriarchal institutions, by insisting upon her celestial ties and earning the name Santa regardless of Church doctrine.

Recognizing that Father Jerome’s claim to spiritual authority is inept, Sofi and Loca challenge not just the priest himself, but the entire Church as institution, in which male leaders insist upon a link between their earthly appointed titles and their spiritual elevation. From the feminist perspective that the personal is political, the women’s confrontation with Father Jerome demonstrates conflict with the nature of authority within the whole of the Catholic Church itself. As author M. Jaqui Alexander states, “One of feminism’s earliest lessons is that the personal is political: some of our lives’ most infinitesimal details are shaped by ideological and political forces much larger than our individual selves” (100). Initial contestation over the nature of La Loca’s resurrection influences both women to recognize the only universal quality of their otherwise extraordinary experience: that the Church systematically silences the voices of its followers, particularly its female followers. Thus, both women attain the knowledge, the

conocimiento, that their spiritual agency is “a sincere threat to the Church’s established male hierarchy” (Sauer 76). This realization allows the women to leave the old ways of thinking as they embark upon a path to form new paradigms. Anzaldúa’s description of the path of knowledge confirms their progress as she explains that, along the path, you acquire new perspectives from which you “see the western story as one of patriarchal, hierarchical control” (“now let us shift” 560).

In *Guardians*, critique of the dominant worldview, or at least that of the Catholic Chicana/o community, comes not through an aha! moment infused with violence or insult but through education. Being on the path of conocimiento means that “you struggle each day to know the world you live in” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 540) which occurs with an open and receptive, learning attitude. In *Massacre*, Castillo describes that part of one’s conscientization is a “‘political’ education” (49). Part of Regina’s conscientization, therefore, is expressed less through her personal experiences with the Church, and more so as observation of the sociohistorical relationships between the Church and the Mexican people. Regina’s distrust for the Church, along with her brother Rafa’s, is so vocal, that her nephew Gabo can quote them by heart: “‘Millions,’ they each say, like they had been saying it all their lives, ‘millions of mexicanos among the faithful, living in poverty. And the Church—so rich’” (21). Regina’s recognition of the Church’s vast wealth and of its influence in the political sphere allows her to conclude that its dedication to the livelihood of the Mexican people is largely insufficient. The despair Regina witnesses, along with the lack of Church assistance for the community, is raw and inexcusable. Women who enter the Church seem to always plead “Someone in heaven, give me a break” (64), and women who cross the border have it even worse. While Crucita never once questions her safety crossing the border because she is “doing the work of the Lord,” and as

young desperate mothers fail to realize the extent of the danger that lurks in the desert as they attempt to bring their children to better opportunities, carrying images of the Virgin to protect them, Regina knows better, knows that these women have been abandoned. Neither an omnipotent, intangible God, nor the very real and very wealthy Church of the Mexican people, will reach out to protect the women and children, brothers, and sons traversing the desert border.

Compounding her existing skepticism, Regina finds reason for concern within her own home as her nephew Gabo spirals further into despair as he waits for his missing father to return. The more distraught Gabo becomes, the more fervor he expresses for his faith, a faith that becomes increasingly ascetic. Gabo torments himself over the smallest sin or material desire. Demonstrating his pietistic lifestyle, even in solitude, Gabo reflects “That day in tía Regina’s kitchen, I decided to eat only the avocado. . . . Little sacrificios prepare me daily for the course I have chosen . . . (I tried not to enjoy it too much)” (19). Eventually, Gabo refuses to eat more than mere morsels for fear of being gluttonous and becomes excessively despondent. Regina sees the danger lurking within her nephew’s ideological framework as he practices self-abnegation to an unhealthy extent.

As *conocimiento* requires, “[y]ou question the doctrines claiming to be the only right way to live” (“now let us shift” 540), and Regina fears for Gabo’s safety as he becomes more fully immersed in his single-minded interpretation of Church doctrine. Her fear is unmistakable as she compares the violence of the Church with the violence of local gangs: “I didn’t want my boy corrupted by Church hypocrisies any more than I had ever wanted him hanging around with hoodlums” (99). Though on pleasant enough terms with the priest, Father Juan Bosco, Regina doubts his intentions with her nephew. She fears that the priest recruited her nephew simply as a

means to address a current priest-shortage. Like Sofi, Regina has no delusions regarding the righteousness of priests, even if they have custom and costume on their side. She reflects

When he wore his collar . . . a priest would look like trustworthiness incarnated. You could surrender yourself entirely to him, your penas, and all your woes. . . . He would look up to the heavens and intervene for you if you had lost your way from God. But not Father Juan Bosco and not the ones I knew growing up. They were men. Just men. And a couple of them had been good and a few had been bad. (99)

Regina's pragmatism is not popular with her nephew Gabo, and yet, when Father Juan Bosco abandons the Church without a word, leaving Gabo behind in a state of distress, the boy painfully comes to terms with his aunt's warnings: "Like my tía Regina tried to tell me . . . priests were men, capable of making mistakes" (163).

In spite of the contestations to the sovereignty of the Catholic Church and the observation of its systemic oppression of the female voice found in these novels, many of the characters in *So Far* and *Guardians* still contemplate or actively pursue a connection with a higher power, and more specifically, the God of the Catholic Church. Castillo achieves this by making a strong distinction between religion as an institutional indoctrination, and spirituality as personal, habitual action meant to bring about psychic order. As Alexia Schemien describes, "religion . . . is closely linked to the institution of an established church" whereas, "spirituality is rather an individual decision" (7). Additionally, Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, and Benjamin Steel state "Religion asks you to learn from the experience of others. Spirituality urges you to seek your own" (qtd. in Schemien 7). Sofi, Caridad, Loca, Regina, Miguel and even Gabo, make cautious efforts to distance their spiritual lives from the sterility, stagnancy, and aggressive authority enmeshed within patriarchal institutions. As they seek to improve upon the models presented to

them, they find it is necessary that they explore aspects of the feminine self denied by patriarchal society: the feminine as body, the culturally feminine, and mythic females. In doing so, they continue to proceed into subsequent stages along the *conocimiento* journey with hybrid<sup>33</sup> variant perspectives, yet they refuse to sacrifice their spirituality. Anzaldúa insists that spirituality and knowledge (whether it be carnal, scientific, feminist, or otherwise academic knowledge) are not mutually exclusive. She states, “motivated by the need to understand, you crave to be what and who you are. A spiritual hunger rumbles deep in your belly” (“now let us shift” 540).

Significantly, it is from the belly, the insides of the gut, where Anzaldúa locates the spiritual yearning. In contrast to the patriarchal order, in which “[t]he Church emphasizes the spirit and preaches denial of the body, of the carnal flesh” (Madsen 25), the feminine perspective requires “information your sense organs register” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 542) and so, the path to knowledge starts with deep, personal, physical, perception. The personal as material, the body itself, is political. Though the body is consistently devalued by patriarchal religious society, which suggests that the ethereal spirit is only temporarily trapped within the earthly and sinful flesh, the body, like the feminine, presents itself as unexplored spiritual space. In a lengthy yet illustrative quote, Anzaldúa describes this unexplored potential:

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us).

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<sup>33</sup> The word “syncretism” is often used when discussing the nature in which a new religion is constructed out of two or more previously existing religions. I purposefully avoid that word here for a number of reasons. As Schemien states, “Syncretism is a rather static term that combines two or more established religions. It purports to fuse traditionally structured religions that evolved but did not really change over time” (6). Additionally, the Mexican-American Catholic religion itself is a syncretic religion, as it is a blend of Catholic and indigenous religions. Hybridity, on the other hand, suggests fluidity. It suggests a variant blend of beliefs (not an attempt at equal fusion), practices, and perspectives with no pretensions to suggest a singular blend that might be followed by as an institutionalized religion.

Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature's cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear. (*Borderlands* 39)

In "The Nature of Race: Discourses of Racial Difference in Ecofeminism," Noel Sturgeon identifies corporeality, the very existence within a material world, as part of the feminine cultural experience: "In a culture which is in many ways antinature, which constructs meanings using a hierarchical binarism dependent on the assumption of culture's superiority to nature, understanding women as 'natural' or closer to 'nature' dooms them to an inferior position" (263). The correlated objectification and oppression of the feminine and nature is made transparent in the denigration of the female body that pervades Chicana/o society and the Catholic religion. Reminding her readers of patriarchal vilification of the body, especially of the female body (i.e. the veneration of female chastity) Castillo argues in *Massacre* "our spirituality has been thoroughly subverted by institutionalized religious customs. The key to that spiritual oppression has been the repression of our sexuality, primarily through the control of our reproductive ability and bodies" (*Massacre* 13). Castillo makes it very apparent: in order to reclaim the feminine perspective, one must also reclaim the body as a positive force.

In *So Far*, Castillo uses Caridad to epitomize the spiritual importance of recognizing the inseparable relationship between the body and the feminine perspective. Throughout the novel, Caridad experiences stark changes in relation to her own body as she progressively develops

personal and spiritual strength. Following the termination of her turbulent relationship with Memo, a man she had once married and who continually broke her heart, Caridad is left desolate: “Three abortions later and with her weakness for Royal Crown with beer chasers after work . . . Caridad no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo . . . and loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo” (9). Amidst the haze of the alcohol and her countless sexual escapades with men “whose name[s] the next day would be just as meaningless to her as yesterday’s headlines” (27), Caridad was spiritually numb. Though her life was filled with carnal pleasures, she compartmentalized, fragmented the pieces of herself, her mind, her spirit, and her body. Thinking back upon this time, the narrator later recalls “all was a blur for her. She could not tell you the name or identify the face of one man among all those who had followed her out of the bars at night where she had spent entire years of her life” (58).

The point of departure from this libertine lifestyle came in the form of a vicious attack by a “malogra,” an evil spirit. On the night of the attack, Caridad came home mutilated— “her nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat” (33). Caridad thinks back on her attacker and the narrator recalls:

it wasn’t a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled . . . but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force. (77)



As the narrator describes Caridad's encounter with la malogra, she recalls images of ships, the limestone plains of Mexico, the gold taken by the Spanish, and treaties signed over the fate of an entire continent. Her vicious attack is associated with the pain of a raped and plundered people. And yet, in addition to the nightmare of the colonizer, the malogra takes on a specifically patriarchal form—Silvio Sirias and Richard McGarry call it a “misogynist spirit identity” (85). Caridad's mutilation itself is eerily reminiscent of the machismo archetypes, the patriarchal rejection of female sexuality, the domineering control of the male authority figure, and the overall silencing of female subjectivity is pummeled out on her breasts, the branding of her flesh, and the stabbing of her throat. After staying in the hospital for three months, Caridad finally returns home a shadow of the woman she was, bedridden and totally dependent on her mother and sister Loca.

Although initial scenes with Caridad demonstrate the damage caused by patriarchal society, as is custom in other Chicana novels, Caridad manages to drastically change the circumstances of her life. Through the horrific pain that Caridad endures and the complete stillness of her bedridden life, she finally finds her connection between spirit and body, a discovery which results in the miracle of her complete and sudden restoration. Dona Felicia, the psychic *curandera* informs Caridad of her power and agency: “*you* healed yourself by pure will” (55). Caridad's recovery comes when she finally joins her thoughts and energy to the activities of her body. After her recovery, she continues to value her physical form through yoga, meditation, baths, and through strenuous outdoor activities in the spiritual celebration of her natural surroundings.

And though Caridad's spiritual connection with her own body was largely the cause for her sudden mending, La Loca assisted with the help of her own physical strength. Loca's prayers

have the capacity to aid both Caridad and Fe, the sister who wouldn't stop screaming. As La Loca prays for her sisters, she physically strains herself, her body convulses, and she enters into one of her "infrequent seizures" (37). Though La Loca's method to cure utilizes a great amount of the energy within her, "healing her sisters from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society—a society she herself never experienced firsthand—was never questioned" (27). At the time La Loca's shaking stops, Caridad emerges into the living room fully healed and Fe, la Gritona,<sup>34</sup> finally stops screaming. La Loca whispers, "Mom . . . I prayed for Caridad... I prayed real hard" (37-38), then starts to cry. As Fe embraces her sisters, La Loca tells her, "I prayed for you" (38). Through the awesome demonstration of Loca's prayers which require the collective effort of her physical, psychic, and emotional energies, Castillo portrays the multifaceted processes required by *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa states:

Attention is multileveled and includes your surroundings, bodily sensations and responses, intuitive takes, emotional reactions to other people and theirs to you, and, most important, the images your imagination creates—images connecting all tiers of information and their data. ("now let us shift" 542)

Through Caridad and La Loca's examples, Castillo advocates the importance of evoking all human capacities into spiritual rituals. Furthermore, Castillo transforms what is often considered a tool of passivity, the act of prayer to request aid from another source, into an alarmingly active and powerful task. Rebeca Olmedo emphasizes the novel's portrayal of female care and healing as acts of agency and asserts, "the novel associates women's spiritual practices with healing as well as service to family . . . miracles that take place as a result of women's prayers and spiritual

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<sup>34</sup> Fe's screaming associates her with the mythic woman La Llorona who committed suicide after she drowned her children in retaliation to her adulterous husband. Trapped in purgatory, she eternally searches, mourning, and wails for her lost children.

vision” (5). Through Caridad’s rebirth into her once beautiful body and through La Loca’s physically channeled prayers, Castillo demonstrates the holistic powers available to females when they cultivate connections of the mind, spirit, *and* body.

Regina’s connection to her land similarly roots her consciousness within the materiality of her body and her connection with nature. When Regina first mentions the land on which she lives, she speaks of it with an appreciation and sense of belonging that extends beyond the limiting reach of her own lifespan: “These lands, this unmerciful desert—it belonged to us first, the Mexicans” (5). Living a solitary life, out in the desert with the prickly pear and the tumbleweeds, Regina is content to live in the company of nature. When people ask her if she is afraid of the coyotes or the rattlesnakes she replies, “The worse snakes and coyotes . . . are the ones on two legs” (6). And while Regina’s somewhat reserved lifestyle may keep her distanced from the two legged creatures of her city, she finds contentedness working on the land. Learning everything she knows about plants and vegetables from her mother, Regina grows her food without pesticides or chemicals. She states, “loving care is what I try to bring to whatever I do,” (48), and she tends to her garden with devotion.

One spring, as Regina and Gabo are planting tomatoes, she receives a divine blessing as the sun and sky put on a wild display:

Regina gasped, not a gasp of fear but a gasp of joy. She was looking at the sun . . . the sun was bright as ever. But it was different. It was flat like a disc and it was whirling . . . we clasped hands . . . Then suddenly the sun, whirling like a disc, unhinged itself from the sky and started soaring fast toward the earth. My tia and I stepped back, as if we could avoid its crash. Then abruptly it stopped. Just as abruptly, the sun withdrew, ever-whirling, back to its place in the sky . . . everywhere that my eyes rested upon was

golden. . . . My tia Regina picked me up and jumped up and down with me in her arms,  
both of us laughing (175)

Though both were present, Gabo asserts his belief that this extraordinary vision was a gift meant specifically for Regina stating, “First, it was my tía who saw what was happening. (That is how I know she is so blessed)” (175). Despite Regina’s warnings to Gabo that no one would believe them if they shared with others what they had seen, Gabo later describes the fantastic aerial display to Father Juan Bosco in confessional. In a surprising demonstration of respect, the priest has total faith in Gabo’s account of the phenomena that was presented to Regina. He informs Gabo that on two other occasions, the Church had documented a similar occurrence and had called it “The Dancing Sun” (175).<sup>35</sup> Regina is given this blessing as she continues to care for the natural world around her, caring for animals and children, keeping her land and soil free of pesticides, and committing to growing organic food in an area where pollution has ravaged the land. Schemien argues that Regina’s gardening is further honoring of material existence as it takes part in the sacred act of creation, of “making and creating something new and productive from the earth . . . [which] adds to the inspiring energy of Coatloapeub,” the Native Earth Goddess, otherwise known as Tonantzin (12-13). Regina’s undeterred dedication to her land, to her physical health, and to her production of sustainable life-giving sustenance connects her divinely given powers as female creatrix with the living forces of the natural world, where she receives a golden blessing.

As Castillo’s works demonstrate the relationship between females and their bodies, their materiality as a positive one, reconnecting female spirituality to sensory perception, she also

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<sup>35</sup> Though Juan Bosco himself believes that Regina and Gabo have witnessed a miracle, he does not refer to the authority of his superior as he is meant to. Rather than appropriate Regina’s miracle for the benefit of the Church, Juan Bosco allows Regina and Gabo to continue to maintain the sanctity and intimacy that they shared in this moment.

works to endow mythic females with strength and dignity. Opposing the patriarchal legends that illustrate females as weak, unintelligent or misguided, legends like the Christian genesis story of Eve, Castillo participates in the Chicana tradition of re-membering<sup>36</sup> and redefining mythic women. Demonstrating the importance of reclaiming these mythic women, “Anzaldúa argues that myth and fiction create reality, and have historically been used against women to control, regulate, and manipulate them” (qtd. in Danizete Martínez 219). In order to correct misogynistic interpretations of female history and capacity, Anzaldúa insists that it is necessary to create new myths. Through the eventual fate of Caridad in *So Far*, and through Regina’s mythic associations in *Guardians*, Castillo offers new myths that celebrate females and honor their participation in the human story. In *So Far*, Caridad falls in love with a beautiful woman named Esmeralda while on a spiritual procession. And while the two remain dear friends (Esmeralda already has a partner), their affection for one another is deeply scorned by a young man named Francisco el Penitente. After he stalks the two women to an ancient New Mexican city, named Sky City, the women recognize him amongst a crowd. Suddenly, the two women run. Straight off the mesa, out into the sky, they run. As they hover in the air “more kite than woman,” (211) the shocked townspeople hear a voice: “The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female” (211). The bodies of the two women were not found broken on the ground: “there were no morbid remains. . . . Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women . . . down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever” (211). Caridad’s departure from this world brings her and her sister spirit to the

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<sup>36</sup> A term used to express not quite that one “remembers” something in the traditional sense, but that one brings forth a cultural “memory” that many have forgotten, giving new breath to the stories and traditions of the Mexic-Amerindian people.

womb of the earth, led by the comforting voice of the female deity Tsichtinako. Rather than dwell on the predatory imminence of Francisco, whose actions encouraged the women to leave this world, Castillo creates a positive image of this transcendental departure, illustrating a female-centric myth in which women are the creators of the world. Through the Acoma myth, a myth generating from a matrilineal tribe, Rodriguez states, “Castillo revitalizes and emboldens the representation of women, in the face of the ideological construction of supposed preternatural myths, such as the Christian genesis myth. Indeed, one senses not a tragedy in these lines, but a romantic connection to the earth and rebirth. . . . They have returned to what the Acoma myth of creation refers to as the earth’s womb” (77). Through the exposition of this ancient origin myth, Castillo demonstrates that there are alternative, stories regarding the origins of humankind and that these may be invoked to esteem the power of female creation.

In *Guardians*, Regina is subtly portrayed as a manifestation of the Virgin, an association strongly made by Abuelo Milton. Upon his first meeting with Regina, Milton is totally taken aback. He lets on that there is something special about her when he calls Regina “a goddess—una mera diosa. La Helen of Troy... This one here, like her name, smelled like una reina” (69). La reina, “the queen,” Regina, acts as mother to Gabo, the gang-member Tiny Tears, and her daughter Gabriela. In effect, she exhibits the qualities of mother Mary as she serves as mother protector to the innocent and weak around her. Moreover, like the holy mother, Regina is also a virgin. Her virginity, however, is not guarded as a matter of principal. Though Regina and her husband had loved each other deeply since they were twelve years old, they married hastily before he was shipped off to fight in the Vietnam War. He died while fighting overseas, and Regina hadn’t been emotionally, or physically, involved with another man since. Though she is a virgin, Regina’s dismissal of the importance of this emphasizes her association with the Virgin

Mary as a mother-protector figure rather than posit Regina's virginity as the source of her "goodness." Alexia Schemien asserts that through the affiliation of Regina with the Virgin, "Castillo focuses on genuine holiness achieved by a decent and modest person in real life as opposed to institutionalized abstinence as in priesthood" (12). Castillo deconstructs the space between the divine and the earthly, imbuing Regina with a heavenly disposition while simultaneously demystifying the Virgin as a mythic goddess.

Due to the emphatic critiques of the Catholic Church by these empowered women, the reconstruction of spirituality as connected to materiality, to the female body, and the celebration of reconstructed myths that refuse to denigrate female sexuality, many critics have concluded that Castillo's goal, especially in *So Far*, is to eviscerate the Catholic Church. Sirias and McGarry conclude "*So Far From God* constitutes a modern-day allegory that attacks tradition" (95). Daniel Alarcon states that the novel offers "a scathing critique of the Catholic Church" (149) and Michelle Sauer asserts that each of Castillo's characters in *So Far* "abandons traditional Catholicism" (82). Yet, upon further examination, it is evident that these evaluations are not completely illustrative of the dynamic possibilities that Castillo presents in regards to the practice of Catholicism within her texts. Castillo's feminized characters' spiritual practices still invoke Catholic imagery and symbolism throughout these two texts in a number of ways. For example, most of her major characters are named after Catholic saints and biblical values. In *So Far*, Sofi, Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe are named after a family of martyred, beatified women whose names in English are Wisdom, Hope, Charity, and Faith. In *Guardians*, Miguel informs Regina that he was named after Saint Michael, while Gabo bears the name of the archangel Gabriel. In both these novels, inexplicable miracles occur that characters interpret as the work of the Catholic God. The miracles in these novels including La Loca's resurrection, the ectoplasmic

returns of Loca, Caridad, and Esperanza after their deaths, Gabo's stigmata (his hands that bleed like the hands of Jesus), and the cosmological spectacle that occurs on Regina's land, challenge academic expectations that favor logic and reason over mysticism and the supernatural and acknowledge otherworldly experiences that are often deemed illogical and therefore imaginary. Furthermore, their association with the traditional belief system of Catholicism underscores the importance of this faith in *So Far* and *Guardians*. Through the presence of what Roland Walter calls "polyphonic discourse" (89), or the presentation of the firsthand accounts of multiple characters, each character is able to illustrate his or her own spirituality and the ways in which Catholicism has informed and shaped his or her spiritual practice.

In *So Far* all of the women but Fe retain ties to the practice and faith of Catholicism while following the personal path of *conocimiento* to develop strikingly different displays of spirituality. Fe, whose completely voluntary spiritual, emotional, and ideological disassociation from her family and community is further described in the next chapter, has no further concerns in life than to get married and make money. The shallow nature of Fe's thoughts and desires prove her incapable of either pursuing self-actualization through *conocimiento* or of valuing spiritual or ethical belief systems. All other women featured in the novel, however, provide thoughtful and reflective insights into their understandings of spiritual practice and faith. The cult healer, the *curandera*, Doña Felicia incorporates Native American, pagan rituals into her healing practices yet she professes to have complete faith in the Father God of the Catholic Church. She demonstrates her blend of Catholic faith with pagan practices when she discusses her healing tactics with Caridad. When a little one is brought to her cursed with *mal de ojo*, the evil eye, she explains her healing method: "I rub an egg over his little body... and always I say at least one Our Father" (49). The narrator describes doña Felicia's spiritual journey and



demonstrates that though she had doubts in the Catholic faith as a young woman, these had subsided, and “doña Felicia came full circle reaching a compromise with the religion of her people when she became caretaker of the House of God in Tome. And finally, she came to see her God not only as Lord but as a guiding light, with His retinue of saints, His army, and her as a lowly foot soldier. And she was content to do His work and bidding” (60). Though this may sound exemplary of the passive servility that leads to female oppression, the *curandera*’s relationship with her Lord God is a mutually beneficial relationship in very concrete ways. Doña Felicia is repaid for her faith in God by being blessed with psychic and healing powers. These divinely bestowed powers provide her with her source of income, and contribute to public recognition of her as a respectable, wise, gifted, and active woman. Doña Felicia serves as a role model, spiritual teacher, and guardian for Caridad, all the more demonstrating the ways in which her faith contributes positively to her life and the lives of those around her.

As Caridad learns the ways of healing through Doña Felicia, she too must put her faith in God. Doña Felicia warns, “nothing you attempt to do with regards to healing will work without first placing your faith completely in God” (59). Thus, Caridad begins her apprenticeship desiring the ability to “listen to the Lord” and desires “her own surefire signs that came from him” (56). As Caridad’s faith develops, and her spiritual practice includes fewer traditionally Catholic rituals, her spirituality becomes a hybrid collectivity of traditional Catholic beliefs, Native American beliefs, and the celebration of body and nature and she develops routines based on this hybridity. In honor of her Catholic influences, she lights votives, prays to saints, burns incense and practices her yoga. Through her routine, she follows the miraculous recovery of her physical body with recovery of her spiritual body as she “was slowly restored internally by the

psychic attentiveness she received from her teacher and which she learned to give to herself” (45).

For Sofi and La Loca, though they remain defiant of the patriarchal, clerical order of the Church in which select males are considered the superior interpreters of religious matters, they deeply embrace faith in the Holy Trinity. When La Loca emerges from her coffin, resurrected in front of the local parish, she claims that God, “Our Father in heaven” (3) sent her back to the world to pray for others. That is exactly what La Loca continues to do as she prays for people of Tome and especially for her sisters. As La Loca lies in her deathbed, her “ectoplasmic” visitor, “the lady in blue,” transforms into a nun who brings her great comfort. The nun “did not seem interested in talking about nobody besides La Loca and just making her feel better when she couldn’t get out of bed no more” (244). Despite the fact that La Loca’s faith in practice does not adhere to the traditions of the Catholic Church, her belief system remains entrenched in the teachings of Catholicism. Sofi’s faith is similarly a variation of Catholicism, yet it is one that defies the patriarchal norms that limit her potential for full spiritual engagement. Even though Sofi rejects Father Jerome’s complete authority in religious matters, she still continues to practice the Catholic ritual of confession within the Catholic Church (65). She further exemplifies her stance when she exclaims to the doctor, “I am a great devotee to our Lord, Su Hijo y La Virgen, doctor, and I resign myself to Their Will” (227). Significantly, Sofi maintains faith in the Father God and his son, Jesus, yet she entrusts her faith in the Virgin as the third spoke of the Trinity, rather than the ambiguous Holy Ghost. Like Caridad, then, Sofi’s belief system is a faith in both male and female divinity. This is further demonstrated in her creation of M.O.M.A.S., an organization for mothers of martyrs and saints. Rather than replace the beliefs of the Catholic Church, M.O.M.A.S. provides an organization for females through which they are

able to deliver a feminist interpretation of the belief system already in place. As Victor and Edith Turner argue, this outlet for female activity within religious affairs brings to life values that, though neglected, have always been embedded within Catholicism “with its stress on the power of the weak, on *communitas* and liminal phenomena, on the rare and unprecedented, as against the regular, ordained, and normative” (qtd. in Doyle 191). Though these characters in *So Far* interpret and practice spirituality in their own unique, politically conscious ways, their practices are highly reliant on the Catholic faith of their communities.

In *Guardians*, Gabo is extremely dedicated to his faith and worship of the Catholic God. It is his faith that brings him peace despite the immense emotional trauma he endures. Throughout the novel, as Gabo prays he is consoled; his faith encourages him not to despair but to be confident that his Lord has a plan for him. As Schemien observes, “Gabo has a close relationship to God and he has his very own spirituality. When he feels lonely in real life, he turns to his spirituality” (15). Gabo’s dedication to Catholicism is further apparent as his plans are to enter seminary school after high school. For a young boy who has seen so much pain and experienced so much grief, the Church remains the only place he can turn to where his “body and soul [are] calm” (65). While Regina has sharp words for the Church, heavily criticizing its ineptitudes, it is to the Bible that she turns after Gabo’s death. She confides, “I read Mathew to find Gabo. . . . I feel my sobrino there. Maybe it don’t make sense to no one. But it does to me. Gabo talking to me through Mathew” (210). Though Regina has distanced herself from many of the traditions of the Church, she finds comfort, and the pure selflessness of her nephew, in the words of Mathew which tell her to “forgive men their trespasses” (210). It is through the lessons found in Gabo’s favorite Bible book that she is able to find courage and strength within her life.

Although many of the characters in Castillo's novels practice a spirituality that differs in some respects from traditional Catholicism, it is clear that Castillo is far from "abandoning" or "attacking" Catholicism altogether. For Dona Felicia, Caridad, La Loca, Sofi, Gabo, and Regina, traditional Catholic beliefs remain integral to their ways of life. And though each of these characters depends on Catholicism to varying degrees, they also demonstrate that their faith in the Father God of Christianity does not inhibit them from embarking on the path of *conocimiento*. In fact, their spirituality is informed by the "always-in-progress, transformational processes of *conocimiento*" (559). They learn that in every aspect of their lives, including their spiritual lives, they must be active agents, constructing their own world perspectives. As Anzaldúa explains: "you pick and choose views .... [to develop] not a *mestizaje* imposed on you but one whose process you can control" (541), and as you employ *conocimiento*, you must question "conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents" (541). Castillo's characters make evident their dedication to challenging convention, yet even as they form their own spiritualities, rejecting the interpretations imposed upon them, Catholic convictions remain. It is for this reason that Castillo's work is so influential, for, as Anzaldúa insists "the new paradigm must come from outside as well as within the system" ("now let us shift" 541). The creation of a paradigm both within and without finds transitional power in the space *in-between*. Anzaldúa emphasizes that it is in "the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems" (541) that we find *nepantla*, the ability to create bridges across binary divides of inner/outer, us/them, and even Catholic/ and the politicized feminist. Castillo's hybridization of traditional Catholicism with other forms of spiritual practice demonstrates that those committed to the path of *conocimiento* need not abandon cultural or religious traditions that imbue their lives with meaning.

Through the polyphonic quality of Castillo's work, in which each character is able to display his or her personal spiritual affiliations, Castillo allows each character to express spirituality and understand faith in ways that are important to him or her. It is because of this heteroglossic narrative style that her works neither advocate for, nor repudiate, any particular beliefs. Instead, they demonstrate that though many may have differing spiritual views, what matters most is the ways in which spirituality contributes to the well-being of individuals and their communities. Through *conocimiento*, each character learns in what ways spirituality may contribute to his or her well-being. As Castillo states in *Massacre*, "Our goal should be to achieve joy.... We will determine for ourselves what makes us feel whole, what brings us tranquility, strength, courage... on our journey toward being fulfilled human beings." (*Massacre* 147) Thus, through her representation of various spiritual expressions, Castillo again demonstrates her ability to function as a *nepantlera*, illustrating the similarities, rather than the differences between different spiritual practices and demonstrating that there need not be such a divide between female activists and their home communities. For those within the Chicana/o community who have felt their views to be disregarded by the *activistas* producing literature, Castillo's novels provide promising visions of respect and acceptance for various spiritual beliefs.

## CHAPTER IV

BRIDGING ACROSS DISTANCE AND LOSS: FINDING STRENGTH  
WITHIN COMMUNITY THROUGH SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Chicana protagonists within the canon often demonstrate extreme enthusiasm for the ways in which self-definition leads them to discover new avenues of opportunity and adventure that await them outside of their traditional communities. This genre emerged during the first time period in history in which Chicana females were *able* to explore the world away from home. For Chicanas who do not get to leave their home communities however, are often restricted from spending time in public spaces as the analysis of machismo culture in the first chapter demonstrates. In general, women who remain within Chicana/o communities are not seen to frequent public facilities or locales outside of their homes and neighborhoods. Diversely, in *So Far* and *Guardians*, Regina, Sofi, Esperanza, and Caridad all proactively take part in their communities by volunteering, providing healing services, engaging in activist work and otherwise working in the public sphere. This integration of females into the traditionally male spaces of Chicana/o societies challenges the conception of gender-specific spheres. Though overall public perception has typically not been kind to women who are frequently found outside of the home, Castillo's characters demonstrate that active, self-actualized women can contribute positively to the welfare of their communities. While Chicana literature typically demands that women leave home to achieve individuality, Castillo's characters provide an alternative to the genre norm in which self-actualizing women must leave their families and communities. Furthermore, these novels demonstrate that communal and social activism may actually contribute to individual growth. Thus, these novels facilitate the transformation of the relationship between the female subject and the community around her.

Chicana literature and theory have long been working to change the dynamics between women and the overall Chicana/o society. As women in Chicana literature practice mestiza consciousness, employing the lessons of “personal is political,” they understand that redefinition of the self undeterred by societal pressures, is integral to creating change. Refusing to further participate in the practice of self-denial, the denial of female and bodily potential, protagonists understand that life change is necessary in the redefinition of identity. These females push the limits of possibility in order to experience the culturally taboo, to discover their strengths, and to fulfill their desires. In order to escape what many consider to be a stifled existence within traditional Chicana/o society, many Chicana protagonists leave home. This is seen, for example, in the experiences of Sandra Cisneros’ protagonist Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, who longs for a life outside of the barrio. Esperanza decides to leave home to pursue her dreams of becoming a writer. As Anna Marie Sandoval examines the consequences of Esperanza’s actions, she states, “by living an independent life, she will change the tradition that has kept her and other women silent” (29-30). Esperanza’s anticipated journey away from home and community is akin to that of many other Chicana protagonists who dare to imagine that a different lifestyle is obtainable. As critic Elizabeth Martinez notes, “Since the mid-1980s, other fiction by Chicanas similarly reveals a strong female character (and writer) who creates her own path” (131). In many texts, the family, while not forgotten, is nevertheless left behind in order for female characters to pursue their dreams. Martinez continues to describe the self-reliance of these protagonists stating, “Such characters perform as independent subjects whose presence is not dependent on another being, but rather on her own actions” (132). Through the development of autonomous female characters, this fiction discloses the breadth of opportunity that awaits Chicana females who yearn for an unconventional life. Thus, the Chicana protagonist often

embarks on her journey alone. Refusing the rolling pin, the factory, the labels of virgin or whore, of good daughter or compliant wife, these narratives offer visions of new opportunities for Chicana females.

Not by accident, these self-determining protagonists have much in common with their authorial creators. Seeking new understandings of life and identity, most Chicana authors themselves left home, leaving behind the traditions and customs that failed to contribute to their personal growth. Though the importance of *la Raza* is never denied, continued habitation within Chicano communities is often considered to be incompatible with the process of self-definition. As Rebolledo and Rivero state:

Chicana writers build a world closely related to hearth and home but also adventurous, daring, nonconforming. Most of all, they see their own persons as independent entities, taught by their social context, but very much their own creation. Brought up on advice and admonitions, on tradition and custom, they nevertheless go on the wind and fly far from home. (112)

As many Chicana authors have attested, it is higher education that has provided the avenue through which they have been able to find and assert their autonomy.<sup>37</sup> Anzaldúa describes, “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons” (*Borderlands* 39). Though many Chicana authors come from humble backgrounds,

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<sup>37</sup> For further reading, see Horno-Delgado et al., *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings* and Deborah Madsen’s *Understanding Chicana Literature*.



through their creative talent they have found the means to move out of impoverished neighborhoods, to enter academic institutions, and to join the middle class.<sup>38</sup>

Though the activism of Chicana authors and their protagonists have done significant work in ending the silencing of female expression, the genre's advocacy for a politic of individual self-improvement can sometimes be seen as a promotion of self-centeredness. Furthermore, some consider Chicana feminism to be assimilationist, reflecting values of Anglo culture. Marcos Pizarro explains, "In the mainstream of the United States, life is understood and organized through the significance of individuals. . . . For Chicanas/os . . . life is understood at the familial and community level. Individuals typically seek the love and respect of their families and community members above all else" (157). Because the Chicana feminist politic prioritizes redefinition of the self and the quest for self-actualization, some have interpreted this perspective to represent the same quest for "self-serving vertical mobility" (Perez 56) as that of the Anglo American Dream. Hurtado also notes, "the advocacy in many Chicana feminist writings of left-of-center political strategies by definition can exclude more politically moderate women" (145). This is especially the case for women who find fulfillment in their roles as mother, wife, daughter, sister, etc., women who "have not seen the advantages of challenging patriarchy" (Hurtado 141). As Chicana authors have repeatedly depicted the process of self-actualization as one requiring great individual engagement and the distancing of self from family and community, many have been reluctant to commit themselves to such a process.

In addition to lacking appeal for some, Chicana feminism/feminists have been harshly criticized for seemingly inciting total cultural abandonment. Because Chicana feminist politics

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<sup>38</sup> With a dedication to portraying the Chicana development of subjectivity, authors mine the personal experiences and personages of their upbringings for narrative material. Critic Aída Hurtado observes, "As writers, academics, and successful artists... [they] have achieved a class status higher than the constituencies they write about" (137).

critique not just the imperialism of the Western World, but the behaviors and beliefs found within their families and communities, some see their activism to be culturally denigrating. Nieto Gomez called the Chicana feminist movement an “anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-man, and therefore anti-Chicano movement” (qtd. in Hurtado 141). Hurtado asserts “Many Chicano men in and outside the Chicano movement, as well as some women, called the emerging Chicana feminist consciousness a betrayal” (141). In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Anzaldúa exemplifies the contempt that Chicana feminism has incurred as it dares to explore the impacts of sexism rather than dedicate total efforts to *El Movimiento*’s activism against racism and economic oppression. She explains:

It is risky to venture outside the confines of our color, class, gender and sexuality... one experience I had with this was when I was attacked by straight Chicanas at the 1984 NACS conference in Ypsilanti, Michigan and was accused of being more concerned with orgasm and the lesbian movement than with helping La Raza. (264)

The women who confronted Anzaldúa were of the mind that for a Chicana, there was one way to be an activist, and only certain kinds of injustices that deserved being addressed. Activist and literary critic Perlita Dicochea discloses that at a conference on the concerns facing Latina/o youth in San José “a well-respected veteran Chicana activist... argued that she witnessed the destruction of la familia during the [Chicana/o] movement and that Chicana feminism was to blame” (88).

The accusations laid against Chicana feminists are remarkably similar to the accusations laid against a historical woman named Malinche, a woman largely regarded as the mother of the mestiza/o peoples of Mexico. Malinche, who was an indigenous woman thrust into slavery by the Spaniards and given to Hernán Cortez, acted as a translator between the Aztecs and the

Spaniards, and mothered a child of Cortez. Regardless of the fact that Malinche was enslaved, she is largely blamed for the fall of the Aztec empire and considered a traitor to her people. Her very name is used as the stem in the word *malinchismo*, a synonym for “sell-out.” Drawing comparisons between the vilification of Chicana feminists and this historic figure, Norma Alarcón states, “As Chicanas embrace feminism they are charged with betrayal a la Malinche” (“The Theoretical Subjects” 187).

Amidst such a climate of disdain, authors and activists have insisted that rather than betraying their communities, they themselves have been abandoned. Though their relationship to their culture and communities often remains at the forefront of Chicana discourse, these communities exact a heavy cost on women who deviate from the norm. While there is deep love for la Raza and la familia, many insist that the patriarchal paradigms of the Chicano community at large must change before it is considered safe to remain within the home community. Leaving one’s home, family, and community, is not considered ideal. Rather, for many, it is considered a last resort, and one which causes great pain. Moraga describes the devastation felt by many Chicana feminists as she attests, “surfacing . . . is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves as specifically female persons.” (“Between the Lines” 102). It is ultimately the desire of Chicana feminists to be accepted by their own communities without having to endure these painful, albeit rewarding, journeys away. However, some, like Lisa Flores worry that Chicanas “may never have the connections to their biological families that allow them to be whole” (Flores 150). For the sake of future generations, however, many still hope that Chicana/o communities might learn to value and respect Chicanas who seek agency and subjectivity. As Viramontes states, “We cannot, nor will we divorce ourselves from our families. But we need a change in their attitudes” (qtd. in

Anzaldúa, *Haciendo Caras* 293). In “Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood,” Moraga presents the case of one of her students, Rosie, who is the victim of a dysfunctional family, with a “white rapist father [and] silent latina mother” (18). Desperate to see better options for younger generations of Chicanas, Moraga declares “I want something more than 12-step for Rosie and her Latina lesbian kind. . . . She deserves familia resurrected and repaired by us” (*Waiting in the Wings* 18). However isolated Chicana feminists feel, they resoundingly aspire for reunion with family and home communities. Still, they refuse to reunite at the expense of all that contributes to their well-being.

In literature, Chicana authors portray the actualization of autonomy with realism. Their poems and stories illustrate their characters’ experiences of isolation and disregard as they choose between being silenced within their communities, or discovering self-realization in solitude. In Villanueva’s poem “I sing to myself,” the narrator despairs at the lack of support or respect offered her by family and romantic relationships, and proceeds through life “Never finding a breast to rest/ and warm myself” (38-39). Ultimately, she is only able to find strength through her own resolve: “I / woman give birth: / and this time to / myself” (68-70). In the preface to Cisneros’ collection of poems *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, she writes about the life of a Chicana writer, distanced from family, living “like a rich white girl.” She proclaims, “I can live alone and I love to.... / What a crock. Each week, the ritual grief.... / Got a flat. / I paid for it. I kept it clean. / Sometimes the silence frightened me” (37-38, 61-63). Though her character finds contentment in her work and adventures, her existence is also lonely.

In the story “The Broken Web,” Viramontes offers one of the most poignant illustrations of the pain caused by societal and familial neglect, regardless of one’s ventures towards autonomy. The story, which revolves around the relationship of a man named Tomás and his

unnamed wife (her being unnamed further illustrating her feelings of erasure), is told from the perspectives of multiple female characters including the wife, the couple's daughter Martha, Tomás' lover, and the wife's sister. From these various perspectives, it becomes clear just how much pain existed between the couple. Their relationship started when the wife was a young girl, too young to truly know how to love. As her sister tells Martha about the relationship between Tomás and his unnamed wife she explains, "From the very beginning, he gave himself completely to her. And that was a mistake. Because her heart was just a seed then, she could not give him something she had not yet created" (61). She sister recalls Tomás' early infatuation with his future wife and further explains that years previous, while the couple were still young, Tomás left town for a number of months. During his absence, the unnamed woman slept with another man, just once, and yet that fateful night left her budding with pregnancy. When Tomás returned, he still decided to marry the young woman. The more we learn of their marriage, however, it becomes clear that his decision to marry her was made partially as means to forever remind her of her faithlessness, to ensure that she felt her guilt for the remainder of her life. Tomás' love had morphed into what at times seemed to be a hateful servility. Though his wife remained true to him after they wed, Tomás began keeping a mistress of his own. When finally confronted about his indiscretions, Tomás' misogynistic venom pours out in full force:

What are you raving about? You think you're not guilty? You, a whore, a bitch! I'm not finished, stay. Before I hit you again. And again. But you won't cry in front of me, will you? You won't please me by unveiling your pain, will you? . . . Like the devil, you disguise yourself as a gnat to spy on me? I should have spied on you that night you let him rip the virginity out of you, the blood and slime of your innocence trailing down the

sides of his mouth. You tramp. You righteous bitch. Don't I have the right to be unfaithful? (59)

It is at this moment when the wife finally decides to change her fate forever—to rid her life of this oppressive force through an act of agency. And she shoots him.

By murdering her husband, the wife is finally rid of the man who repeatedly hurt her so badly. Regrettably, however, she soon realizes that she only rid herself of his physical presence, that his judgment and cruelty weigh on her still and that his sudden disappearance brings her no resolution. He is unapproachable and thus unaccountable for the hurt he has caused: “Tomás was now an invincible cloud of the past, she thought. A coiled smoking ghost. She kneeled beside him, laying her puzzle-piece heart against his unliving one. Unliving because she had pressured the trigger tight, then tightfingering it until his chest blew up, spilling the oozing blood that stained all tomorrows. And yet he seemed more alive” (60). She mulls over the weight of their unresolved tension; her unspoken and, thus, unheard desire to be understood. “How could she explain to him that she was so tired and wrinkled and torn by him, his God, and his word?” (60). Escape from Tomas was not enough for his wife. What she wanted most was for him to acknowledge her, to respect her, to learn to change. Despite asserting her own agency, and autonomy, she recognizes the limitations that continue to exist when others refuse to acknowledge her as an equal.

The complications surrounding Tomás' death broaden as his wife imagines the consequences that will surely ensue. While she will obviously be held accountable for her own actions, she also guesses what the police will say regarding the topic of their argument: “Tomás was a trustful man, but flesh is flesh, men are men” (60). Believing that her children would one day forgive her, the wife recognizes that God, however, would not. She insists, “He would never

understand; He was a man, too” (60). Without being able to receive acceptance from Tomás, to have her pain acknowledged by society, or to even be granted God’s grace, Tomás’ wife decides her only remaining option is to “become a cricket wailing nightly for redemption” (60). The last we see of this murderess and defeated wife, she is in a hospital cell, the smell of urine and chemicals filling her nose as she sits resigned to her fate. Through the total sabotage of this woman’s life, Viramontes suggests that, while the processes of self-definition and the actualization of agency are vital, without being assured acknowledgment, respect, and humanity from others, it is impossible for agency to take an individual very far in a positive direction. The protest found in art such as this demonstrates the strictures that still exist for females regardless of their efforts to achieve equality and societal respect.

The political position held within traditional Chicana feminism insists that change must emerge from the inside, out, that effective change starts within the individual, then works its way outward to the community and eventually to society at large. From the perspective that “the personal is political,” sociopolitical equality will only be achievable if each person applies political assessment to the different realities, interactions, and experiences of his or her own life. Thus, radical societal change is dependent on the social and political “awakening” of those most affected by the oppressions of the hegemonic order. And yet, the experiences and literature of Chicana feminists suggests that widespread change has yet to move outward in the way that they had hoped. In more recent years, some theorists have begun to challenge the optimism of the belief that personal change has the power to radiate outward. Cynthia Franklin asserts, “The meaning of ‘personal is political’ has become complex, various, and confused” (415) and argues that it fails to articulate a comprehensive understanding of oppression and of institutional privilege. One of the most significant problems that attends the perspective that the “personal is

political” is its inability to address exactly how personal change might lead to institutional, structural change. This theoretical agenda is especially questionable in application as it promotes an understanding of societal politics based solely on one’s own personal experiences. This perspective still permits those in power to ignore or dismiss the suffering of others when they fail to see evidence for oppression in their personal lives, while also permitting others to only pursue political reform insofar as it benefits their personal lives. As Diana Courvant further explains the problems with “the personal is political” claiming that this perspective, which argues that “life should inform theory,” is inherently too nearsighted as it may develop “theories [that] don’t have to be informed by some lives” (462). As postmodernism has taken hold, identity politics have become increasingly unattractive within the academy. However, failure to acknowledge and learn more about peoples of various identity categories, including groups that one may not be exposed to in his or her personal life, for the purpose of political study, for the purpose of identifying institutional oppression, can cause blindness to the suffering of others. Franklin explains

For academics whose work is premised upon oppositional alliances and/or marginalized forms of identity, attention to our institutional identities can be a source of anxiety because—unlike other dominant identities—they are chosen ones that, in various and complex ways, position us as part of rather than poise us against a hegemonic institution. (430-1)

It is becoming more evident to activists that the nuances of the slogan “the personal is political,” over-prioritize personal experiences in the development of political theories. Franklin insists



there is an “importance of developing forms of writing that foreground institutional practices and policies without ignoring the significance of the personal” (429).<sup>39</sup>

In *Postcolonial Critic*, Gayatri Spivak emphasizes the need for change to manifest within groups of sociopolitical dominance without being dependent on the marginalized “other.” She argues, “‘I will speak for myself as a Third World person’ is an important position for political mobilization today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously” (59-60). In “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak continues to make the case that we must not consider the project of affecting societal change to be the primary responsibility of the impoverished and least powerful. Spivak fears that in an imperialist world, the subaltern female will never be able to change her conditions on her own. She insists, therefore, that the academic—those like the Chicana feminist who so desperately desire equality—must “wrench oneself away from the mesmerizing focus of the ‘subject-constitution’ of the female individualist” (264) and learn to change or protect not just the self but to actively work to disempower the institutions of imperialism. Furthermore, she holds responsible not simply those who have been historically oppressed but moreso those who have historically benefited from societal power-structures and insists that the powerful must “unlearn our so-called privilege” (264). Though Spivak recognizes the benefits of subject-constitution, she warns that without contextualizing the position of the “self” as a participant within an imperialist society, without actively, loudly, publically opposing powerful institutions of oppression, positive change will

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<sup>39</sup> Looking at the work of her graduate students, Franklin sees promise in the ability to create more pragmatic activism in the future: the group of students that she mentors “remembers without memorializing, and rethinks without forgoing, *Bridge’s* conceptualization of community-based forms of activist writing and its formulation of the personal as political” (431).

never come for the most marginalized in society. Spivak's argument that those in positions of power must attempt to unlearn their privilege in order to open avenues for Third World persons to actually be listened to is widely accepted. Yet, as Franklin asserts, recognition of the self in relation to the imperialist structures of society requires a return to identity politics, a strategy that remains unpopular within academic forums.

Gloria Anzaldúa addresses this dilemma in her theory of *spiritual activism*. As illustrated in the discussion of *conocimiento*, Anzaldúa considers the self to be spiritually connected to all other living things. While the word "spiritual" can make some academics squirm, Anzaldúa describes this assertion in a very pragmatic way. As the continuance of an individual's life is dependent upon the survival of other humans, and the human species is further dependent on a network of various plant and animal species, Anzaldúa demonstrates that all of life remains connected in a vast web of interdependence. Additionally, she uses the word spiritual to emphasize the supernatural quality of life itself, the mysterious and preciousness of being. In spiritual activism, Anzaldúa presents the ethical position that due to the preciousness of life, life itself must be respected. Each individual must respect and honor all life just as he or she desires to receive respect from others in the pursuit of personal survival and well-being—the dedication to personal survival naturally requires dedication to the survival and well-being of all those connected to the self, dedication to all living things. Demonstrating that all human beings share interconnected interdependence with each other and all living beings and that they share the similar desire for survival, for well-being, and for respect Anzaldúa refrains from reinvoking a traditional understanding of identity politics, and instead proposes an understanding of identity as existential, experiential, and relational. Through *conocimiento*, the individual recognizes his or her public, political identity as being shaped by sociopolitical and historical societies that have

been largely fractured along racial/ethnic/gender lines. Yet those with *conocimiento* recognize identifying categories as contributors to “an experience of reality from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not as a fixed feature of personality or identity” (“now let us shift” 548). As each individual develops the *conocimiento*, the knowledge that his or her survival depends on the survival and contributions of a network of other living beings, Anzaldúa argues that the individual will discover both a physical and spiritual connectedness to something larger than any existing identity category. Highlighting our interdependence with other species, she “insists that the spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life are parts of a larger whole, joined in a complex, interwoven pattern” (qtd. in Keating, “Citizen of the Universe” 54). Understanding the self as part of a larger whole requires the recognition that harm to other living things causes harm to the self—thus, spiritual inner-awareness necessitates civic action as it “motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing” (“now let us shift” 558). In addition to engaging in “compassionate acts designed to bring about material change” (qtd. in Keating, “Citizen of the Universe” 58), Anzaldúa insists that individuals must consistently work to listen to, attempt to understand, and to work with others, organizing large-scale change by “forming holistic alliances” (“now let us shift” 545). Those who implement this activism, who contribute to the well-being of both self (through *conocimiento*) and others (through spiritual activism), Anzaldúa calls *nepantleras*, bridge makers. Anzaldúa’s theories of *conocimiento* and spiritual activism encourage the development of the personal without foregoing simultaneous focus on structural and institutional progress.

Through the development of spiritual activism in *So Far* and *Guardians*, Castillo’s novels serve as a direct response to Moraga’s plea for *la familia* resurrected. Building on the

tradition of the self-defining protagonist that appears in much of the Chicana canon, the female characters in *So Far*, and multiple male and female characters in *Guardians* embark on paths of self-discovery. Unlike many texts within the Chicana canon, however, Castillo endows greater success to those characters who remain physically and emotionally embedded within their communities. Rather than representing the creation of the self-defined feminist Chicana as an isolating process that occurs outside the overall Chicana/o community, the growth of individual characters occurs *within* their home communities. The lessons each character learns, then, are exposed to the community around him or her, allowing the community to similarly develop change. Thus, rather than represent a feminist counter-culture, these texts represent what Ewelina Krok calls a “reintegrative interdiscourse” (263); individual change reintegrated into hegemonic discourse to create societal change as well. By demonstrating that isolationist tactics are futile in the face of societal dangers, that the effectiveness of political activism is limited without the willingness to learn from others, and that community activism ultimately benefits the individual, Castillo demonstrates that the path toward societal change is through spiritual activism. Representing the successful process of female self-definition as occurring *within* the Chicano community, Castillo illustrates how both the individual and the collective might work for the enduring benefit of the other.

In *So Far*, Sofi’s daughter Fe attempts to leave behind the poverty of her family by denying her connection to the Mexican-American community altogether. Thus, she neither practices the self-awareness of *conocimiento*, nor does she acknowledge the responsibility to others required by spiritual activism. Fe spends much of the novel expressing her dislike for her family, and her shame of her family’s impoverished background. In an effort to disassociate herself from her family, she works diligently to save money and move away. All her ambitions

are concentrated on materialistic images: “to make some points with the company and earn bonuses to buy her house, make car payments, have a baby, in other words, have a life like people do on T.V.” (189). Her disdain for her family and background is made clear: “Fe couldn’t wait till she got out—of her mother’s house as well as Tome—but she would get out properly, with a little more style and class than the women of her family had” (*So Far* 9). Fe’s fatal flaw lies in her inability to acknowledge her connectedness to others and to recognize herself as a woman of color and therefore vulnerable to the same oppressions as the other women around her.

Fe demonstrates her spiritual distance from others when she gets a job at Acme International, a company that produces and cleans weapons for the military. At Acme, Fe is unperturbed by her involvement in the production of weapons created to harm others. She values herself and her socioeconomic status above all else and assures herself that hers is “very important work, when you thought about it” (181). Her constant self-aggrandizement is demonstrated when she is told a little desk is her “station” and she relishes the “kind of official feeling” (180) brought about by this label. Fe consistently fails to recognize her connectedness with those around her. As she learns more about her co-workers at Acme, she observes, “[s]ome of the women who worked there did not have a high school diploma like Fe, several spoke Spanish, Tewa, Tiwa, or some other pueblo dialect, and none (except her friend) had had the prestigious experience of having been a white-collar worker before” (179). As Fe considers herself to be above the other women of color, she makes the assumption that others, including her bosses, will recognize her perceived superiority.

Regardless, or perhaps because of, Fe’s narcissism, she is quickly targeted as an expendable resource at Acme. She is transferred into a basement alone where she is exposed to highly toxic chemicals. All the while, Fe’s inflated sense of self leaves her blind to the fact that

she is being mistreated. Her obsession to demonstrate her superiority over the other women-of-color at Acme leads her to regard the “special jobs” given to her by her employers as rewards: “she considered herself a kind of specialty person at Acme” (184). By refusing to recognize herself as part of a larger, connected community, Fe also refuses to recognize the systemic abuse toward women-of-color in her workplace and fails to understand how she too is affected by it. As Renny Christopher asserts, “Fe turns her back on her family’s class status, and on her racial heritage” (195). Thus, Fe’s largest ineptitude is her individualist, disconnected spirit.

After Fe is diagnosed with cancer, and even scapegoated by her company as the one “who was to blame for the illegal use of a chemical,” Fe can’t understand why ACME “was not the least bit concerned about her who was dying in front of their eyes” (187). And indeed, both ACME and the Attorney General’s Office were not concerned about the woman dying in front of them. Fe was just one of a number of poor, suffering women-of-color, ignored, forgotten, and cast aside by the white men in power. Fe’s dissociation from her community inhibits her from engaging in an honest process of self-identification and results in her inability to relate her experiences at ACME and her constant illness to the ways in which indigenous people were being treated all around her—in her mind, she was above it all. As Fiona Mills argues, Fe’s adoption of a simplistic ideological identity results in “intrinsic self-destructiveness” (320). Fe’s lack of spiritual connection to the material world, to other living things around her is further exemplified after her death. Madsen explains, “[i]n contrast to her sisters, all of whom return from the dead and participate irregularly but fully in the life of the family, Fe just dies and does not ever return” (101). Thus, unlike her sisters, the permanence of her death reflects the disregard for spiritual connectedness that she expressed in life.

While Fe demonstrates the dangers of being spiritually disengaged from others, La Loca and Gabo demonstrate the importance of community activism. Castillo demonstrates that the individual is intricately entwined in the realities affecting the community at large. Thus, no attempt at isolation will ensure protection for the individual from the harms the community endures. In *So Far*, La Loca remains totally removed from the society and from all members of the community outside of her mother's home. After her resurrection at the age of three, La Loca insists that she is unable to stand the smell of other people: "She claimed that all humans bore an odor akin to that which she had smelled in the places she had passed through when she was dead" (5). Though La Loca refused to endure interactions with anyone outside of her family, however, she contracts the human immunodeficiency virus. Sofi, in shock at the news that her daughter has AIDS, is dumbfounded. She exclaims, "There was no way that Loca could have gotten it" (208). It is never explained exactly how La Loca contracts the virus. The air of mystery surrounding her disease and subsequent death exacerbates the confusion and sadness of her family and suggests that even the least susceptible can still become the victims of the sufferings associated with the "other" or the outside.

In *Guardians*, Regina is far removed from society, living alone on the far edge of town. She claims to have very little trust for the institutions and people, or as she calls them, the "two-legged coyotes" (89) around her, preferring to live isolated in the desert. Though Regina has attempted to create a haven for herself, and for her family, they still fall victim to the drug and gang related violence of the nearby city and border. After Regina's brother Rafa goes missing, she is unsure of who she can approach for help. Regina abruptly recognizes her self-imposed isolation as problematic. After her nephew Gabo, whom she takes care of for over a year in her brother's absence, is brutally murdered, Regina is exposed to the same suffering that has been

met by countless mothers throughout the region—mothers who have had to witness the tragic deaths of their young at the hands of drug cartels, border-crossing coyotes, gangs, and even police. As hard as Regina tries to remove herself and her family from the dangers of society, she learns that escapism is no match for the ambitious brutality that abounds. Through the fates of La Loca and Gabo, Castillo demonstrates that isolated, individual change remains an insufficient response to the ills that exist in an imperialist, oppressive, and violent society.

In *So Far*, La Loca's sister Esperanza is far from an isolationist as she is extremely concerned with the oppressions of others. Her ex-boyfriend Rubén recalls her activist work:

Back in college, if it wasn't for la Esperanza who led the protest, they never would have had one Chicano Studies class offered on the curriculum. If it wasn't for la Esperanza, who would have known about the struggle of the United Farm Workers on campus? . . .

How would he have known about Salvador Allende of Chile removed by a military coup, or heard Victor Jara, the protest singer, or been told about his beautiful guitar-playing hands being smashed by soldiers' rifle butts. (221)

Esperanza clearly values the lives of others and, as a journalist, works hard to ensure that the oppressions of others don't go unnoticed. After college, she tries to bring this spirit of activism back to her small community of Tome but her activism is not highly regarded by her neighbors. She is described as a "*mitotera*, a troublemaker" (114). Esperanza's activism demonstrates her good intentions, yet she remains out of touch with her community. As Anzaldúa explains the work of a spiritual activist, a *nepantlera*, she describes the stalemate that may occur when one tries to share new perspectives with others: "When you... put your ideals into action... [y]our story fails the reality test. But is the failure due to flaws in your story—based on the tenuous nature of relationship between you and the whole—or is it due to all-too-human and therefore



imperfect members of the community?” (567). When, in the effort to help others, one is pitted against opposition, Anzaldúa insists that the *nepantlera* must use another tactic: “Besides fighting, fleeing, freezing, or submitting *las nepantleras usan otra media... las nepantleras listen*” (567). Rather than listen to her community members, Esperanza’s approach is didactic. She delivers a one-sided conversation, attempting to create changes without consideration for the opinions of others. It is for this reason that she is labeled a *mitotera*, and it is for this reason she is unable to build alliances. Though Esperanza’s passion for community assistance and her concern for the suffering of her people is commendable, Castillo utilizes her failures to demonstrate the importance of listening, the importance of cooperation and communication in the development of alliances.

In *Guardians*, Miguel finds similar difficulties after the disappearance of his ex-wife Crucita. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly discusses his struggles with his masculine drive, and expresses a desire and willingness to rid himself of his *machismo* ways. When his ex-wife disappears, however, he shuts down. With all his masculine bravado, Miguel is crippled by the idea that he is somehow powerless. He explains,

What I can’t stand...is that my child is asking me to give her something I feel I don’t have the ability to do—return her mother to her... And I, a man with the best intentions, who obviously could not love enough or the way my wife had wanted me to express myself, have failed my whole family miserably. I could not even keep Crucita from harm’s way. (184)

As the perspective that Crucita’s kidnapping was somehow Miguel’s fault seeps further into his psyche, he breaks down. When Abuelo Milton finally checks on his grandson, he finds him in a dire state: “He was in some scruffy sweats, like he hadn’t changed in a month. ‘Cause he hadn’t.

That was obvious.... My grandson shut down. That's what happened" (187). Though, like Esperanza, Miguel is unsuccessful in helping his family because of his determination to be the cornerstone of all progress, he is ultimately able to develop spiritual action through the help of his grandfather. Milton reminds Miguel that his search for Crucita should not come from an inner desire to assert control, but from the love he harbors for his children. He scolds, "What's the matter with you, Mikey? . . . I've spoken to your kids, también. . . . Frankly, they aint doing too good, neither. . . . Son, . . . get off your trasero and let's go do something for those kids' sakes" (190). As Miguel observes Abuelo Milton's demonstration of love and care, he finally understands that activism must come from a place of love rather than the desire to demonstrate his macho, controlling, capabilities to evoke change. The two men recruit the help of Father Juan Bosco, Gabo, and even the gang member Jesse, and through collective work, they are able to find Crucita. Through Miguel's struggles to find his ex-wife, Castillo asserts the importance of developing alliances and accepting the contributions of others.

As Castillo responds to the need for both personal *and* social change, she presents hopeful possibilities in the midst of tragedy. Renny Christopher asserts that in *So Far*, "Sofi's value system . . . focuses on communal survival rather than on individual gain" (197). Sofi embarks on a political campaign one day after her washing machine breaks. Frustrated with her broken screen door and her washing machine, Sofi suddenly recognizes her economic struggles to be related to the hardships of the overall community of Tome. Sofi decides to take action by running for mayor. According to Krok, "Esperanza's political idealism encourages Sofia" (273), and Sofi begins to understand the ways in which a little political activism might, indeed, help herself and her community:

Our 'jita, Esperanza, always tried to tell me about how we needed to go out and fight for our rights. She always talked about things like working to change the "system." I never paid no attention to her then, always worried about the *carneceria*, the house, the girls... But now I see her point for the first time. ... I see that the only way things are going to get better around here is if *we*, all of us together, try to do something about it. (142)

Yet as Sofi employs the activism she learned through Esperanza's example, she does so with the listening skills of a *nepantlera*. Demonstrating that her willingness to work as a public servant is rooted in the needs of others and not in specific ideals of how activism *should* be implemented, she states, "I don't know nothing about those kinds of things, but I'm sure willing to work for community improvement" (138). Thus, Sofi embarks on a politically active venture through the means of spiritual activism.

Recognizing that "to rescue an area as economically depressed as [Tome] would truly have taken more than the desires and dreams of a self-proclaimed mayor" (146), Sofi asks for the opinions of everyone in her community. The narrator explains that Sofi and her comadre "started their campaign by going around for months talking to neighbors, to fellow parishioners, people at the schools, at the local Y, and other such places to get ideas and help; and little by little, people began to respond to Sofi's 'campaign'" (127). With the help of her community, Sofi is able to "bring it all together" (19). In an effort to boost the economy of Tome while still maintaining the residents' way of life—Sofi's comadre asserts, "All we have ever known is this life, living off our land" (121)—the people of Tome create a cooperative "sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise" (146). Through Sofi's efforts, the town is able to create a source of income independent from the local factories that have filled their water, soil, and bodies with toxins. All living beings within Tome find renewed vitality. The cooperative builds slow, yet steady,

economic growth for the community within Tome and everyone, including Sofi, reaps the benefits. Through bartering, Sofi gets “most of her own things that needed fixing around her house done” (149). What’s more, Sofi receives the esteem of her community, being no longer identified by the status of her relationship with her husband (la Abandona), but instead referred to respectfully as “la mayor Sofi” (131). Krok concludes, “Sofia, by drawing upon the experiences of her daughters, achieves what they could not: She reaches personal liberation *and* sets changes in motion in the community” (273). Thus, Sofi demonstrates that the practice of spiritual activism brings rewards to community and individual simultaneously.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Regina brings “loving care” to all that she does (48). And while her commitment to organic farming provides her with healthy food sources, it also ensures the continuation of all life in the natural world around her. As an organic farmer, she takes great care to protect the earth from poisons and pollutions and with the help of Miguel, Regina brings her farming expertise to those less fortunate in her community. In addition to the environmental work she contributes to her community, Regina sparks change throughout Cabuche as she finds compassion for the gang member Tiny Tears, despite the young girl’s involvement in a deeply traumatic event. Towards the end of the novel, Tiny Tears, who is kidnapped by a local gang along with Crucita, is found by Gabo, naked on a couch in a dingy home. Tiny Tears’ rage in that moment, however, “like everything else about the monster girl that no one loved, was out of control in that house . . . being raped every day. No food, just poison in her veins” (208). As Gabo tried to lift her off the couch, carry her out of the house, the girl resisted, perhaps in fear. And even though Gabo put Tiny Tears down, she still stabbed him with “pointed glass from a broken window straight into his corazón” (208). Though Tiny Tears is responsible for pushing that glass through saintly Gabo’s heart, Regina finds love in her own

heart for the young girl. As Regina reminisces about all her losses—her father, her mother, her husband, Rafa, and now Gabo—Regina remembers a letter from her deceased husband that read “I leave you to care for all the innocent creatures” (206). As she takes this task to heart, Regina surprises all by deciding to react with sympathy and kindness towards her nephew’s killer. Not only does Regina comfort “María Dolores Jiménez, known to everyone as Tiny Tears (207) in weekly visits to the prison, but she also volunteers herself to raise the girl’s baby. Regina reasons “there are always enough frijoles in the pot to feed everyone” (207). Regina’s decision to adopt the little girl is not complicated: the baby has needs, and Regina has the means to provide for her needs. The pragmatism which she demonstrates in her decision to care for the baby (whom she names Gabriela) illustrates Regina’s staunch refusal to abide by societal expectations. Despite her immense grief, Regina refuses to react to the injustices served to her and her family with anger, malice, or a desire for revenge. Instead, Regina remains committed to a life of practicing love for others. Schemien argues, “[t]his last action symbolizes the hopeful continuance of forthcoming generations through the loving hand of Regina the mother-figure” (13). Though she suffers immense pain, Regina commits herself to spiritual activism in her new role as adoptive mother to María and Gabriela.

Regina’s actions cause a stir in her community, as others are disturbed by her grace toward the wicked. Her long-time coworker Mrs. Martinez is the most outspoken. Regina describes that one day, upon entering the school, her coworker “came around the counter and, standing right in front of me...slapped me.... ‘How can you go see that little monster?’ she asked, gritting her teeth. She was talking about Tiny Tears” (207). Though Regina’s compassion and willingness to do something for the lowly gang member is initially met with disdain, the attitude of her community begins to change. Soon, dialogue begins with her co-worker regarding

their mutual experiences with trauma. Mrs. Martinez, whom Regina has known for over a decade, reveals for the first time that she had a son who was also senselessly killed. Carminero-Santiago claims that in *Guardians*, there is a “collective trauma of lost ones at the border as having a communal and anticipatory impact (as a community, the characters come to the point where they *anticipate* disappearance and loss)” (Carminero-Santangelo 312). Through Regina’s spiritual activism, she begins a dialogue within her community regarding the realities of life on the border. As she makes public her trauma as well as her attempts to work through it, her actions ripple “outwards, touching both immediate and extended family members as well as the larger community” (Carminero-Santangelo 313). Regina initiates a methodology of compassion as a means to address all those afflicted within the borderlands. The community is bound together through loss, and Regina begins a healing process that suggests possible improvement for the life of her adopted baby girl.

Portrayal of the female assertion of subjectivity in *So Far* and *Guardians* demonstrates an adherence to the common themes of the Chicana canon. Rather than finding change through individualist means, however, Castillo’s novels demonstrate the workings of spiritual activism as characters combine inner works and public acts. Sofi and Regina’s abilities to not simply bear their share of grievances in life but to find ways to move towards better futures stem from their ability to perform the work of the *nepantlera*. As bridge makers, they demonstrate concern not just for their immediate kin, but work for the safety and well-being of their natural environment and all those within their communities. These texts provide necessary representations of female empowerment that are coupled with societal acceptance and alliance building. Castillo’s work proves dedication to the theoretical perspective of spiritual activism as her works look toward progress: “We are left/ with one final resolution / in our own predestined way, / we are going

forward. / There is no going back” (Castillo, *My Father Was a Toltec* 83). As Castillo demonstrates, it is through both individual and communal efforts that la *familia* is resurrected.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BRIDGING TASKS REMAINING FOR OTHERS

As the previous chapters have argued, *So Far* and *Guardians* have contributed to the canon by addressing concerns facing the Chicana/o community in three distinct ways. First, these texts provide a revelatory, non-essentialist methodology for addressing cross-gender relations. Second, they demonstrate how deeper understandings of spirituality through *conocimiento* may draw together the oppositional divide between Chicana feminists and the Catholic Chicana/o community. And third, they reveal that the path to transformative change for the individual requires transformative change in the community as well—that the best methodology for change employs simultaneous individual and social work. As these chapters are partitioned in order to better explore possible responses to three separate concerns facing Chicana literature, the texts reveal that an effective response to any issue requires the implementation of non-dualistic, inclusive methodologies. In each chapter, the texts are shown to advocate for a methodology of balance—balance as verb, as action, as commitment. The methodology of balance as action requires consistent consideration for the perspectives and concerns of us/them, self/collective, oppressed/oppressor, etc. In an effort to maintain a balanced consideration for two entities that are consistently changing in meaning and form, this methodology requires constant reevaluation, constant adjustment.

As *So Far* and *Guardians*, remain committed to the canon's representation of the development of female subjectivity these novels progressively assert that female subjectivity must be created within a holistic context of personal and societal change in order to avoid the dualisms and egocentrism of patriarchal society. The women in Castillo's novels are capable



of successfully navigating themselves through life insofar as they are able to develop feminized *conocimiento*: the awareness of the relationship between self and others as one of kinship rather than opposition, the recognition that all individuals' life experiences are shaped by their particular sociopolitical positions, the understanding that past, present, and future perspectives are pertinent to consider when undergoing transformative identity construction, and that all must observe an ethical obligation to sanctify the existence of all living things. As Walter states, "Castillo invests her female characters with a historicized and politicized consciousness—a nonessentialized consciousness based on a radical mestiza subjectivity that is, a subversive position of intelligibility and mode of knowing necessary for the transformation of cultural practices" (92). The mestiza subjectivity developed within these novels is a feminized subjectivity, or rather, an asserted "experience of reality from a particular[ly] [feminine] perspective" ("now let us shift" 548). This perspective leads to "an alternative space of living, thinking and relating based on justice and equality" (Walter 89). Yet this feminine consciousness presents itself through male and female characters alike. Rather than stand contradictory to tradition, Castillo's texts are integrated into that which has come before. As Pearce-Gonzalez asserts, *So Far* "should not be regarded as an attempt to produce a newly feminized 'truth,'" one that might replace patriarchy, but rather, that it contributes a feminized "disruptive excess" to the "'disruptive excess' [already] present in the logic of patriarchy" (13). As Sofi, Caridad, Loca, Esperanza, and Domingo in *So Far*, and Regina, Miguel, Milton, Gabo, and Father Juan Bosco in *Guardians*, integrate this feminized perspective into their lives, they begin changing the realities around them.

While Castillo's novels demonstrate the importance of female agency and a feminized world perspective, they do so without creating new "others." These novels refuse to re-instantiate

binary divisions or the use of identity politics, as demonstrated in the nonessentialized male characters of Domingo, Miguel, Gabo, Milton and Juan Bosco. And though these texts avoid identity-based politics, abstain from imagining nationalistic ethnocentrism, culture is not abandoned. Instead, traditions are examined, modified, and practiced along with new rituals to fulfill the needs of the present without foregoing the gifts of the past. Furthermore, family and community are seen as integral to the efforts of providing positive change within both the individual and within large societal institutions. Christopher affirms the innovative function of *So Far* as it “imagines a world in which some of those oppressed by class, by gender, and by racism can rebuild society in a different image. The novel offers an imaginative hope, even while it documents a series of tragedies” (190). As “Castillo explores and transgresses ontological, political, and gendered boundaries” (Danizete Martínez 224) between male/female, Catholic/politicized feminist, and individual/collective, she brings attention to the in-between space, the space of *nepantla* where similarities are posited rather than differences, new perspectives are developed, and growth occurs.

Though change begins with *conocimiento*, “the constant process of revision, mediation, negotiation, and transformation” (Mermann-Jozwiak 113), it must be accompanied by spiritual activism to create profound results. By demonstrating these two processes at work, *So Far* and *Guardians* “def[y] the popular image of Mexican-American women as victims of social and political forces” (Mermann-Jozwiak 105) through the characters’ “politicization and through coalition-building” (Wehbe-Herrera 149). Thus, they illustrate a new phase for the *mestiza* as she proceeds to the next stages in Anzaldúa’s theoretical vision, becoming a *nepantlera*. Anzaldúa reminds readers: “To exclude is to close the bridge, invites separatism and hostilities. Instead we.... must invite other groups to join us and together bring about social change” (“Counsels to

the Firing” 263). And indeed, through Sofi’s sheep grazing collective and spiritual organization M.O.M.A.S., and Regina’s network of support, these novels demonstrate the nepantlera’s capacity to transform her world.

Demonstrating their allegiance to the work of the nepantlera, these texts delineate the relationship between reader and fictional text by informing the reader of injustices that are manifest in the material world: in the desert lands of the U.S. southwest. In *So Far*, for example, the tragic fate of Fe is similarly met by many in economically struggling areas. As poverty creates desperation for work, businesses see the desperation of the poor as an opportunity to exploit. In many impoverished areas across the country, especially in communities of color, factory jobs prove to be dangerous work, and companies demonstrate no responsibility to the communities that serve them. As Daniel Alarcón notes, “Fe’s workplace experience has striking parallels to recent lawsuits that have been filed against IBM by over 200 of its former workers at its plants throughout the country for allegedly exposing them to chemicals that they claim caused cancer and other serious illnesses” (147). Just as workers are exposed to toxic chemicals and suffocating fumes, so too is the land that they live on. The town of Tome, New Mexico, the setting of *So Far*, provides a particularly poignant example. Suzanne Ruta reports that over 2,400 locations in and around Tome are “suspected of contamination with plutonium, uranium, strontium 90, tritium, lead, mercury, nitrates, cyanides, pesticides and other leftovers from a half century of weapons research and production” (qtd. in Platt 147). As Claudia Sadowski-Smith contends, the development of maquiladoras along the border has only exacerbated the environmental concerns of that region. In poor communities where “people are willing to do any kind of work to get out of poverty” (Olmedo 17), the combination of environmental concerns and workplace hazards prove deadly.

In addition to the economic and environmental injustices that these novels expose, the border appears in these novels not as an ideological construction, but as the actual divide between the United States and Mexico. The borderlands are menaced by drug cartels, coyotes, and la *migra* (immigration officers), and those who live there are seeing devastating changes to their communities because of U.S. policy changes. The two most impactful policy changes have been the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) “signed by [Mexican President Carlos] Salinas, President George Bush, and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in the autumn of 1993” (Carr 22), and the strengthening of the U.S. border patrol. Sadowski-Smith explains that as NAFTA led to the development of maquiladoras along the border, it sparked the mass migration of workers into the borderlands region. The U.S. responded to this migration “by taking border enforcement to historically unprecedented levels” (117). However, the tightening of border policies has yet to stop immigration and immigrants have “instead been detoured to other, more dangerous stretches of the border, where many more immigrants have died. The prevalence of military might and violence at the border has created an environment in which border deaths have become commonplace” (Sadowski-Smith 128). *Guardians* especially comments on the perils of life in the borderlands, and by exposing the reader to the struggles of these communities, it further emphasizes the urgency to form alliances on behalf of those who suffer.

Demonstrating that the stakes are matters of life and death, Ana Castillo’s novels *So Far From God* and *The Guardians* make visceral statements regarding the importance of *nos/otras* consciousness, of *conocimiento*, and of spiritual activism. Anzaldúa argues, “[w]e are each responsible for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything—more brains, more physical strength, more political

power, more money, or more spiritual energies—must give or exchange with those who don't have these energies but may have other things to give" ("Acts of Healing" xxviii). Just as the characters learned in *So Far* and *Guardians*, readers are implicated in a call to action, to embark on the path of *conocimiento* and to learn the bonding tools of the *nepantlera* in order to bring about a better tomorrow for all.

Though the Chicana literary genre and Chicana feminist activisms have struggled to bridge together various factions of the Chicana/o cultural community—factions including females, males, the academic community, the rural community, the LGBTQ community, the religious community, etc.—the innovative and optimistic work of Ana Castillo and Gloria Anzaldúa provide both the tools and visionary guides for the project of total societal transformation. In a time of extreme political polarity within the United States, a time in which the greater majority have been oppressed and/or exploited by the greed of power hungry elites, collective bridging and alliance formation are methods vital to ensuring proactive progression toward a more just and thriving society for all. While finger pointing and scapegoating of immigrants, of the poor, of Democrats and of Republicans, of people of color, of women, and of the LGBTQ community continue to fracture society, to destabilize the strength of our own interconnectedness, to threaten the potential of both the individual and the collective, the significance of Anzaldúa's and Castillo's holistic methodologies for change cannot be overstated.

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